

The Political Hat Trick

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

All elections matter, but not all elections portend change or leave us smarter about our politics. The past presidential election, however, scored the hat trick. It was one that mattered, one that brought change, and one that left lessons. Here are some of them.

- **The economy trumps everything else** – Many things can matter to voters in presidential elections. These include judgments about character, leadership potential, experience, as well as the candidates' positions on important issues of the day. But what matters most is beyond debate – the economy. And when concerns about the economy prevail, as was the case in 2008, those concerns dwarf and obscure virtually every other issue. In that sense economics trumps everything else in American politics. Jay Cost, writing in *Real Clear Politics*, elegantly summed up the voters' simple calculus: "If the economy tanks during a Democratic administration, vote Republican. If it tanks during a Republican administration, vote Democrat." That, largely, is what happened.
- **Elections are referenda on the past much more than they are forecasts about the future** – Both candidates spent substantial time talking about the future – about future problems, future opportunities, and future solutions. But the electorate finally and firmly cared most about the past, both what to make of it and whom to reward or punish for it. The election of Obama and rejection of McCain was ultimately a thumbs down judgment on the Bush administration after eight years of GOP control. In that sense voters looked not prospectively to the future, but retrospectively to the past to make their decision.
- **Race has been transformed as a factor in American politics** – The election of 2008 will have an effect on racial politics similar to the effect Kennedy's 1960 win had on religion. Prior to Kennedy's victory, the "wrong" religion, specifically Catholicism, was assumed to be an insuperable bar to election to the presidency. Religious bigotry didn't disappear after 1960, but it lost its electoral cogency – it no longer determined candidacies nor frightened voters. Similarly, Obama's victory in 2008 will not eradicate race as a factor in American politics, but like religion earlier race will come to be seen as less and less relevant to voting decisions.
- **Money still matters in American elections** – Will Rodgers nailed it years ago when he quipped that politics was so expensive "that it takes a lot of money even to be defeated." John McCain proved that once again this year by raising \$350 million and still losing the election. Obama in winning raised even more – an estimated \$750 million. McCain may not have lost because he spent less, just as Obama may not have won because he spent more. But neither candidate could have run without the combined millions they raised – mute testimony to the continuing central role of money in American politics.
- **The best antidote for voter apathy may be voter anxiety** – Those who worry about low voter turnout and declining rates of political participation will profitably look to this election for its historic turnout rates. Turnout reached as high as 80% of registered voters in some parts of the country. Nationally the turnout rates compare to the modern high water mark turnouts of 1960 and 1964. The difference this year was that voters cared about the outcome and saw a personal stake in it. A lot of them were also nervous – about the economy, the war, and the country itself. The take away point: voters vote when they perceive that both the election and their vote matters. Both did in this one.
- **The role of Gender in American politics became a little murkier** – Both Democrats and Republicans now find themselves unsure how gender might play out in future politics. Gender issues and personalities

were major drivers of the Clinton candidacy in the Democratic Party, yet she lost her race. For Republicans Sarah Palin played a critical role that may have helped her party avoid a popular vote rout. Yet Palin did not win her race, and her future, like Clinton's, is unclear. Nothing in 2008 implies that gender has lost its punch in our politics. Nevertheless, the election has left uncertain just how gender will play out in future elections.

- **Governing has a cost for the incumbent party** – President Bush is hugely unpopular and was a drag on the GOP ticket. Nevertheless the Republican loss after eight years in office follows a pattern well established since the early 20th century. Only rarely does a party hold onto power for more than two consecutive terms. Since Howard Taft in 1908 the incumbent party has won three or more consecutive terms only three times – with the GOP doing it last in 1988. Governing in modern times often brings hard decisions that incur substantial political costs on the majority party. Third terms have become the equivalent of a triple play in baseball: fascinating to watch play out, but few and far between.
- **VP choices don't help but they can hurt** – Finally, 2008 left us with a fresh example of a very old lesson in American politics – above all else pick a vice presidential candidate that won't hurt you. Both presidential candidates probably violated this axiom. But McCain paid a heavier price for it. While Palin undoubtedly helped galvanize the base, she hurt even more by alienating independents and moderate Republicans. Only once in modern times – 1960 – did a vice presidential candidate actually deliver the electoral votes essential to win the election. Yet presidential candidates keep trying to find VP choices that will move them closer to the finish line.

Some of the lessons of 2008 are familiar. Presidential elections always have been a referendum on the incumbent party, a bad economy always trumps every other political concern, and money always matters. But there were also some things about this election that were different. Foremost among them, race is lessening as a determinant of political outcomes and gender is entering a new and unclear period. That's a lot of lessons and probably enough change for one election.

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