

John McCain Versus the Scholars

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Whether you support John McCain or not, you have to feel some compassion for the guy. Almost everything seems against him. Running as the candidate of the incumbent party, the economy keeps looking worse and worse, the Iraq War (which he supports) is unpopular, and his own president (whom he hopes to succeed) is nursing one of the lowest approval ratings in history. Worse perhaps, he is running against the first charismatic presidential nominee in at least a generation.

All of this is bad enough. But now still another gang is throwing cold water on the McCain candidacy: the scholars who study presidential elections. And they could be more trouble than all the rest.

The pesky scholars are adding to McCain's woes by using reams of research on past elections to pose some provocative questions, such as does McCain have any chance to win at all given the dismal political and economic climate for his party; in fact, do presidential campaigns even matter in winning and losing? Provocative they may be, but these are questions that need aired as we gear up to spend an estimated billion dollars on a campaign that some believe may not matter.

To be sure, asking if campaigns matter may strike some as absurd. Few political observers who watched the 2008 spring presidential primaries and caucuses will doubt that nomination contests matter. In both parties this year, the competing campaigns clearly did determine who won and who lost. Varying funds, strategies, candidate appeals, and other resources made the difference.

Moreover, most scholars believe campaigns for Congress and statewide officials also usually matter. Local races in particular seem most influenced by the quality of the campaigning. In these races so called "campaign effects" do occur.

But are these "campaign effects" also found in presidential general elections? Or is the outcome of general elections totally governed by macro political and economic factors beyond the influence of any campaign? In the parlance of political science, do campaigns merely "activate predispositions" voters already have, or do campaigns actually determine winning and losing?

Most scholars, with some exceptions, believe that the former is the case with respect to presidential elections. They conclude that the fall campaign has little or no influence on who wins or loses the election. By examining macro factors such as the economy, war, foreign policy, presidential approval, GDP growth, etc., it is believed that forecasting models can accurately predict the electoral outcome before the fall campaign begins. Some have already done this, forecasting Obama winning between 52 and 55 percent of the popular vote in November.

Given this, it is argued that John McCain running in 2008 doesn't have a prayer. When the political fundamentals are so arrayed against one candidate, as we have now, what that candidate does and says doesn't matter very much. In the current contest, so this thinking goes, the Republicans are running face down against

some of the most brutal political winds seen in several generations. The party could save its money; the candidate should save his breath.

But maybe first someone should tell John McCain how hopeless it is. He doesn't seem to have gotten the memo. Neither, in fact, have the pollsters who are showing the race close and perhaps tightening. Indeed a recent national Gallup Poll showed McCain winning among likely voters, while a second showed the race tied.

To the point: Why is McCain doing so well when he should be struggling to stay in the race at all? Excepting perhaps Carter in 1980, no major party nominee in modern times has faced more obstacles, carried more baggage from his own party, or faced a more formidable opponent that does the Arizona senator. Yet McCain is remarkably competitive and within striking range of Obama.

Surprisingly the 2008 race seems to be shaping up as a stiff test of the theory that presidential campaigns don't matter. But why, why is this campaign not working out the way both the scholars and the pros expected?

Answering that question requires a caveat or two. The 2000 election also flunked the scholarly model. Gore should have won according to the "campaigns don't matter" school. Some apologists point out that he did win the popular vote while losing the Electoral College. So maybe 2000 is one of those "outliers" that doesn't tell us much. Still on the basis of 2000, we have to consider that maybe the "campaigns don't matter" models no longer matter themselves.

Nevertheless, the major models did work before 2000 and since, predicting accurately in 2004 a Bush re-election. That leaves us still trying to explain why the current contest, once expected to be a landslide victory for Democrats, is more and more looking like a squeaker.

Certainly one must acknowledge that Election Day is still months away, and in the end, the scholar-predicted Obama landslide may materialize. But at this point, it is close—and is so because of Obama's failure to assuage the doubts of two distinct groups of voters: those who don't like him because they know too many things about him they don't like and those who do like him but feel they don't know enough about him to trust him.

The first group of voters think they know Obama already too well. This is the Obama of Jeremiah Wright and of "Bittergate"—the Obama who does not share their values and who, in their view, is just another tax and spend cultural liberal. To a second and larger group of voters, Obama, despite a mega campaign, is still undefined. These voters are not sure who he is and what he really stands for.

McCain is complicit here—exploiting both of these schisms in Obama's base by portraying Obama as lacking gravitas, unprepared to lead the country, and a conventional liberal politician. But McCain is an accessory after the fact. Obama created his own problems of identity and trust, and he must confront them himself just as Kennedy in 1960 and Reagan in 1980.

That presidential pair, one from the 1960s, the other from the 1980s, are role models for Obama. Both faced a skeptical even hostile public—Reagan because of his conservative views and Kennedy because of his Irish Catholic background. In the end both Kennedy and Reagan used the fall campaign to convince the American

people they could be trusted with the presidency. Until Obama does this, the outcome of this race remains in doubt.

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