

The 2008 Presidential Campaign

**By Glen Sussman.*

The 2008 campaign for the presidency has provided American citizens with surprises as well as opportunities in terms of choosing a new president. The long primary season that ran from January to June resulted in nominees - - John McCain (R) and Barack Obama (D) - - who were not the likely winners of their respective parties. As far as Democrats were concerned, Hillary Clinton was the front-runner and heir apparent to the Democratic nomination. On the Republican side, John McCain's faltering campaign in the early months of the primary season suggested that Republicans would end up selecting another nominee. All in all, the primary season provided Americans with a host of candidates one of whom might serve as a "first" - - the first African-American (Barack Obama) the first woman (Hillary Clinton), the first Hispanic (Bill Richardson), the first Mormon (Mitt Romney) or the oldest nominee (John McCain).

Both parties had a variety of candidates vying for the nomination of their party but it was the Democratic party that provided the most interest among citizens and media pundits alike. The primary contest between Obama and Clinton would test the mettle of both candidates as they crisscrossed the country in their respective attempt to capture delegates for the summer convention. In the end, Obama squeaked out a victory in one of the closest contests in party history. Two questions became inevitable at this point - - namely, would Hillary Clinton campaign for Obama and would supporters of Clinton, especially female voters, support Obama. On the Republican side, Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Ron Paul were pushed aside, one by one, by a resurgent McCain campaign.

Both Obama and McCain have supporters and opponents. While targeting traditional Democratic constituencies, Obama has also focused on the youthful cohort, young people 18-29 years old who have traditionally been ignored or neglected by major party candidates. Obama, however, pursued a campaign similar to that of Bill Clinton in 1992 when he too sought the support of young people. As noted in a recent article in Time Magazine (January 31, 2008), Obama is looking forward to a "youthquake" to help him win the White House. What the Clinton campaign of 1992 and the Obama campaign of 2008 have in common is the likelihood of a very close election and therefore the need to attract and recruit all segments of the American electorate. Of course, as has happened in other campaigns, young people have failed to register to vote and/or have failed to turn up on election day. Critics have argued that Obama lacks executive experience in general and in foreign policy in particular. McCain has a following among those who like his "maverick" approach to politics and willingness to buck even his own party when necessary. He was also a POW

during the Vietnam War that has given him sympathy among citizens and members of the armed forces. On the other hand, McCain has been in a similar situation as George Bush (the father) - - namely conservatives who idolized Ronald Reagan were not so eager to give their support to Bush (the father) and two decades later, they have had second thoughts about the conservative credentials of McCain.

Obama's and McCain's choice of running mate added excitement to the presidential contest. The junior senator from Illinois selected the longtime senator from Delaware, Joe Biden, as his running mate. By choosing Biden, Obama added a senator who had valuable experience in two very important aspects of American Politics - - namely, a legislator who had a clear understanding about the operation of the U.S. Senate and one who had foreign policy experience. In contrast, John McCain, who some thought would choose Romney to shore up his lack of expertise on economic matters, chose instead Sarah Palin, a relatively unknown governor of Alaska as his partner in the presidential contest. By choosing Palin, McCain shook up the race by attempting to bolster his support among conservatives with a very conservative running mate and to appeal to female voters by adding a woman to the Republican ticket for the first time in history. While Biden was well known among politicians and media pundits, Palin was a novelty - - unknown and therefore the likely target of media attention. Where Democrats questioned and criticized McCain's choice of Palin, Republicans, especially conservative Republicans, were very enthusiastic about her which helped to bolster the McCain-Palin ticket in the short term. Inevitably, however, both vice-presidential candidates were scrutinized since both carried "baggage" into the presidential contest. Biden has a history of verbal errors and has been criticized for "plagiarizing" comments used by other public officials. Palin has been accused of heavy-handed politics even by fellow Republicans in Alaska and with less than 50 days left in the run up to the election, she is involved in a troubling scandal involving allegations that she used her power as governor to fire the "top cop" in Alaska because he refused to fire an Alaska state trooper who divorced Palin's sister.

One of the fascinating aspects of the 2008 presidential campaign is the involvement of a large number of young people - - the so-called Millenium generation - - who have been mobilized in a way not seen since young people worked to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in the early 1970s. Although about 55% of young people voted in the 1972 presidential election, voter turnout among members of the youthful cohort has declined over the years (except for a slight upward bump in 1992) dropping to 32% during the 2000 presidential election. However, young people once again began to show interest in the electoral process and their participation increased in the 2004 and 2006 elections to about 42%. What makes this demographic important is that young people 18-29 make up approximately 44 million potential voters - - about 20% of the American electorate. Both issues and technology have played a role in energizing young people. The economy and jobs, along with terrorism and the war in Iraq, constitute the major issues identified by them in recent polls, the same issues of concern to older voters. Where younger and older voters diverge is found in the types of technology used by young voters and employed by the Obama campaign, in particular, to reach out to them. This form of communication includes Facebook and YouTube among others. It is interesting

to note that young people are not a solid block with about a third identifying as Democrats, a third identifying as Republicans and a third identifying as Independents. If the youthful cohort is paying more attention to this election and has demonstrated an upward turn in participation as shown by increased turnout in the 2008 primary season, young people have the potential to play an important role in the 2008 presidential election. In fact, three out of four young people, 18-29, feel that the country is headed in the wrong direction, an indicator not good for the legacy of the Bush administration or the prospects of the McCain campaign, at least among this youthful constituency.

Eight years ago, the Bush Administration inherited a balanced budget, a budget surplus and a country at peace. However, life in the U.S. changed on 9/11 but more importantly in March 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. Moreover, the economy has deteriorated with huge budget and trade deficits, home foreclosures, infrastructure needs and the collapse of financial institutions. Against a backdrop of a very unpopular Republican president, a country at war and economic deterioration, the McCain-Obama presidential contest has taken on added importance making the 2008 presidential election very consequential for the American electorate.

As the McCain and Obama campaigns are engaged in the race for the presidency, each candidate will have the opportunity to speak directly to the American people in three debates. It is very likely that the first debate on September 26 in Oxford, Mississippi will draw a large audience tuning in to watch and compare the candidates. Moreover, the one and only debate taking place in St. Louis, Missouri on October 2 between vice presidential candidates, Biden and Palin, will also draw a large audience in an effort to better understand and evaluate the candidates who might be only a heart beat away from becoming president.

By September 2008 the race between Obama and McCain is considered very close as reflected by national polls and the electoral college map of states. While national polls are interesting they are not helpful since the U.S. does not select its president by the popular vote. Instead, we need to look at each state and where it falls in terms of its electoral vote allotment. In short, the country is still divided in terms of red and blue states although each campaign is trying to flip some states to their side.

By mid-September, according to Cable News Network (CNN), Obama has 223 electoral votes from states that are strongly on his side or leaning toward him while McCain has 200 electoral votes from states that are strongly on his side or leaning toward him. With 538 electoral votes in play, Obama or McCain will need to secure 270 of these votes to win the election.

Although there are some states where there is the possibility of reversal from one party to the other, the real focus of attention is on the handful of competitive or "battleground" states that include mid-Atlantic Virginia that hasn't voted Democratic since supporting Lyndon Johnson in 1964 but now finds itself with the McCain and Obama camps currently locked in a tight race. Large electoral states in play include Florida, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Western states that are important to both Obama and McCain are

Colorado and Nevada. Small but not to be ignored is New Hampshire in the New England region of the U.S. The important point is that, taken together, these states have 115 electoral votes that are important to winning the White House.

As the 2008 presidential campaign unfolds, the results will be important not only for American citizens but also for the international community.

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