

//Notas de Análisis//  
**The Politics of Personality**

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In Politics, one week can be a long time. The last couple of weeks in the Democratic Primary have dramatically changed the political landscape. Obama's "*golden boy*" image has suffered major setbacks and those asking for Hillary to quit now appear to have discovered a new "glow" surrounding her political persona.

First there was that San Francisco speech in which Obama, with anthropological detachment, observed that he perfectly understood why people in mid-town America were "*bitter*" as their jobs "*were being exported overseas*" and as a consequence, were "clinging to their religion and their guns." This, together with other silly anecdotes during his campaign in Pennsylvania which purportedly showed a lack of connection with the common man (including his bad bowling scores, his discomfort in sitting around in a bar and sharing a beer with the locals, and his preference for arugula salad!), won him the label of elitist and out of touch with blue collar workers. These missteps were also well-exploited by Hillary Clinton, who in contrast with Obama, during the same campaigning route, portrayed herself as a "*regular working gal*", conquered the white blue-collar vote and did much better than expected in the wealthy Philadelphia suburbs. Thus, she won handily in Pennsylvania, and was able to extend the momentum gained in Ohio and Texas. Although it appears as a mathematical certainty that Obama will win the delegate count, she is still ahead in superdelegates, but, more importantly, Obama seems to be losing ground fast. If she wins Indiana and Obama gets North Carolina this coming Tuesday, the agony goes on.

Bill Clinton is already talking about the popular vote (which Hillary is winning clearly if Florida votes count). That decision will most likely be made at the National Convention in August, if by then there is no declared winner.

In the meantime, Obama has had to deal with the "Reverend problem", as Rev. Jeremiah Wright continued to damage his national image. When Barack denounced his anti-America sermons and declarations (the latest one being a claim that the US government had "invented the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color"), Wright replied that "he was a

politician, and that is what politicians do,” thus aiming at debunking the myth that Obama is a new type of leader, a Washington outsider. This led to Michelle Obama’s appearances in CNN and NBC to try to damage control or, as she put it, to “*define ourselves and not let other people define us.*” Her strong, intelligent and straightforward demeanor may have partially succeeded in restoring his image as a leader who is in it not for power but because he sincerely believes he can change the country; while she her certainty might have reassured followers, the Jeremiah Wright story will not go away so easily. How much this has hurt Obama’s chances in the Primary still remains to be seen, but, more importantly, it may have inflicted a deadly wound to his national chances at the Presidency.

Politics is a complex phenomenon and public opinion is fickle. Voters have little time to follow the vicissitudes of a campaign, to understand the nuances of ideas and policies, to make well-informed decisions on which candidate will better represent them. In fact, that is the main value of political parties: to help people make sense of politics. Their role is to offer clear and consistent policy positions so voters can make up their minds on which party better represents their values, needs and demands, to aggregate the vote and articulate voters interests. But they also must appeal to deeper feelings and emotions, and generate symbols of identification and allegiance, in order to mobilize people to participate.

Several new phenomena are at play in this election and political strategists are bewildered by them. The first is the premise that we are beyond partisan politics and ideologies. This is Barack Obama’s claim, that his style of “new politics” transcends ideological barriers and crosses over political parties. That there are no more “red states” and “blue states”, just people with similar problems. That he can appeal to people everywhere and from all political convictions by focusing on their individual values, needs and demands. That the old divides, namely, Market versus State, Private versus Public, Rich versus Poor, White versus Black, don’t apply anymore. He posits that those frameworks are the wrong questions to ask, he talks about the new politics of unity, and he reassures them that he will rule for all. And his historical example is Ronald Reagan, who won over to his side the “Reagan Democrats”. Regardless of the fact that this is the wrong analogy (that could be the subject of a different article), the main problem is that perhaps at this point in

time, *post-ideological politics* may not be *good politics*, and will not win the election. He concedes important ideological points that should instead be argued. This is what has given Hillary the momentum: she went back to basics, and is speaking to each group directly, stating her “bread and butter policies first” positions in clear, pragmatic terms. Her upbeat, clear-eyed mood is more appealing to many than his “egg-head”, post-modern intellectual analysis. That is why he has the PhDs and she has the blue collar vote.

The next problem that bemuses political thinkers is the fact that, at a time when Bush’s approval ratings are the lowest in the history of Gallup (27% on job performance, 21% on the economy), John Mc Cain continues to run very close to his Democratic rivals (Obama leads him 46% to 43% and Clinton 45% to 44%). When voters are asked which party they would prefer to win the election, over 44 per cent say Democratic. Of Independents (one third of the electorate, which will have the decisive vote) two-to-one prefer Democrats. So why is John Mc Cain still doing so well? The answer can be found in his likability and his proven independence from the party in several instances during his Senate career. In an extremely skillful slalom motion, he has been able to first win back the conservative majority of the Republican party by supporting the troop surge in Iraq and gaining a bland Bush endorsement (no easy feat given his positions on immigration, campaign-finance reform and his criticism of the way the war in Iraq was executed, and then succeeded in moving away from Bush as fast as possible, visiting New Orleans and portraying himself as a caring protector of the poor.

Although voters disagree with him on main issues, such as staying in Iraq for as long as it takes, they trust him, his sincerity, his patriotism and his values. His age does not appear to be a problem. But this dichotomy between lack of support for the party and favorable ratings for the candidate could be interpreted as another indication that parties are in demise. But the paradox here is that this decline in party allegiance is *not* for the post-modern reasons we have pointed out above (demise of ideologies of Left and Right, emergence of a range of post-material political issues such as the environment, consumer rights, and lifestyle choices). Instead, here we are confronted with an older type of politics, one that *preceded* ideologies, namely a more personalistic style of politics, based on primordial feelings about leaders who embody the *Rousseauan* will of the people. This is

much more likely to be found in European “continental” and Latin American political cultures than in the Anglo-Saxon ones, where modern mass based representative parties were invented.

If modern democracy is inconceivable without political parties, as Shattschneider and Schumpeter concluded, will charisma alone be enough to carry representative government forward?

And, if the Primary goes his way, will the charisma of a Washington outsider and political dreamer trump the one of a down to earth Senator of Arizona? Will the issue of race play a role in the national election? Faced with the choice of a black candidate with admirable academic credentials but unproven political record running for the favorite party, and a white patriot representing a highly discredited party, who will Americans vote for? Political analysts and historians will have to wait at least until this November to sort all this out.

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