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Obama, Organizer-in-chief

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Article abstract

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Obama, Organizer-in-chief

DANIEL STURGEON

Abstract: In his essay, Daniel Sturgeon argues that while Barack Obama was a special candidate, he was no messiah. He was well organized, consistently on message, made few mistakes, and otherwise ran a solid campaign that will be studied for years to come.

Résumé: Dans son essai, Daniel Sturgeon démontre que si Barack Obama était bien un candidat spécial, il n'était pas un messie. Il était excellemment bien organisé, répétant un message invariable, a fait peu d'erreurs, et a également mené une campagne qui sera étudiée sur les années à venir.

Obama, Organizer-in-chief

Daniel Sturgeon¹

Throughout the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Senator Barack Obama was both praised and derided as “the messiah.” References to Obama as messiah were common enough to inspire Timothy Noah of Slate Magazine to initiate the *Obama Messiah Watch* in early 2007, which he said would “periodically highlight gratuitously adoring biographical details that appear in newspaper, television, and magazine profiles of this otherworldly presence in our midst.”² His coverage included various extraordinary claims or implications involving Obama that made him sound almost superhuman. Similarly, prolific Catholic blogger Christopher Blosser started the blog, *Is Barack Obama the Messiah?* where he posted statements, quotes, and even artwork where people described Obama as a larger-than-life messiah-like-figure.³ Even the mainstream media played upon the image. *The New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, and Germany’s *Der Spiegel* featured Obama as the messiah on covers and in February 2008, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews gushed, “I’ve never seen anything like this. This is bigger than Kennedy. [Obama] comes along, and he seems to have the answers. This is the New Testament. This is surprising.”⁴ This media bias in favor of Obama and implication that he is “the chosen one” did not go unnoticed.⁵ In August 2008 the McCain campaign’s “The One” ad, including footage of Charlton Heston as Moses parting the red sea, mocked Obama as messiah.⁶

But these tongue-in-cheek questions of Obama-as-messiah raise important questions about how this “skinny kid with a funny name” could become the first African-American president of the United States of America, merely a generation after Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination. How special is he? What exactly did it take for him to win? How exactly was this political outsider four years ago able to both corner the Clinton machine to secure the democratic nomination, and then defeat John McCain to secure the presidency? The purpose of this paper is to outline the factors that led to Obama’s victory, including both outside factors that set the stage in his favor, and the

¹ Freelance journalist based in Washington, DC

² Noah, Timothy. “The Obama Messiah Watch.” Slate. January 29, 2007.

³ The blog can be found at: <http://obamamessiah.blogspot.com/>

⁴ Gillette, Felix. “Primary Scream.” *The New York Observer*. February 6, 2008.

⁵ Following the election, The Washington Post’s Ombudsman Deborah Howell declared her paper’s coverage as biased in favor of Obama. Howell, Deborah. “An Obama Tilt in Campaign Coverage.” The Washington Post. November 9, 2008.

⁶ “The One.” Youtube.

strategic choices made by his campaign that led to victory. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate that Obama is indeed not the messiah, but instead merely a fine candidate – with a bit of luck.

Good Luck

On the campaign trail, Obama would often say, “Now is our time.” This is most certainly true when it came to historical and institutional factors that were in his favor, in addition to events in his favor that he could not have predicted nor controlled.

History

Historically, the 2008 election was unique in two ways. First, since the ratification of the twenty-second amendment to the US Constitution in 1951 – which limits presidents to two consecutive terms in office – Americans have tended to switch the political party in control in eight-year increments. The only exceptions to the pattern are Carter’s four years in the late seventies, and George H.W. Bush’s extension of Reagan’s eight years by another four. Thus, after eight of years of Republicans, it was the Democrats turn for a takeover. Another historical factor is that the 2008 election was the first since 1928 without an incumbent running for either president or vice-president. George W. Bush could not run for president again, and Vice-President Richard Cheney did not seek the nomination for president, as many of his predecessors had. This created an open field, in a year that favored Democrats. In many ways, it was an election for the democrats to lose.

An unpopular president and his war

In addition to these long-term historical trends, factors that also benefited Obama included Bush’s abysmal approval ratings. According to Gallup, Bush’s approval ratings have been abysmal throughout his second term. His average from 2005 to 2008 has been only 37%, with one of his all-time lows of 25% approval coming the week before and after the election. This is only three points higher than the all time low approval rating for Harry Truman in February 1952.⁷ This benefited Obama because any candidate sharing the same party as such an unpopular president would have suffered. This was reflected in McCain’s efforts to distance himself from Bush, and the president’s absence on the fundraising circuit.

Obama also benefited greatly from a shifting sentiment about the War in Iraq. In a speech delivered October 2, 2002 in Chicago, while still only a State Senator in Illinois, he came out

⁷ [“Bush Approval Rating Doldrums Continue.”](#) Gallup. October 20, 2008.

strongly against the move to go to war in Iraq, saying, "I don't oppose all wars. I know that in this crowd today, there is no shortage of patriots, or of patriotism. What I am opposed to is a dumb war."⁸ The invasion came the following spring, and approval for the war reached about 70%. However, after this peak during the initial invasion, support for the war would decline steadily through the election in 2008.

Support for the war waned when the initial invasion ended and resistance in Iraq began. As casualties increased, support for the war declined. In the months after the initial invasion, monthly casualty counts were about 30-40 per month. Casualties increased starting in 2004, with annual totals of 800-900 casualties per year. One of the highest periods for casualties was from April to June 2007, just as the primary races were beginning.⁹ Shortly before Obama's announcement that he would run for president, a survey by the *Military Times* showed more soldiers disapproved of the war than approved, for the first time.¹⁰ Obama's anti-war message resonated with many democrats who were against the war.

Obama had declared his opposition to the war several days before Senators Clinton and McCain voted for the resolution to go to war in Iraq. This one vote would haunt her throughout the primary campaign. In February 2007 at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire, a voter asked her about her vote. She replied, "Well, I have said, and I will repeat it, that, knowing what I know now, I would never have voted for it."¹¹ Despite this, it remained difficult for Clinton to convince Democrats strongly opposed to the war that she was indeed also opposed. For those most opposed to the war in Iraq the anti-war choice was obvious. Obama was able to run a campaign of judgment over experience against Sen. Clinton on this question, at least holding even on this question.

However, by July 2008 there were only 13 casualties in Iraq.¹² The war in Iraq was moving off the front pages, and out of people's minds. "The Surge," announced in January 2007, and strongly supported by John McCain, had reduced violence and US casualties. The success of this policy reduced the urgency of ending the war, decreasing the importance of the war in voter's minds. For voters, the choice became that of judgment (and inexperience) vs. experience – an argument that should have benefited John McCain, and an argument he seemed to be winning – and which he would undo.

⁸ [Remarks of Illinois State Sen. Barack Obama Against Going to War with Iraq](#). October 2, 2002.

⁹ Clinton declared her candidacy on January 20, 2007; Obama declared his candidacy on February 10, 2007; McCain declared his candidacy on February 28, 2007.

¹⁰ Hodierna, Robert. "Down on the war." *The Military Times*. December 29, 2006.

¹¹ [Greene, David. "Senate Vote to Authorize War Shadows Clinton."](#) Morning Edition. NPR. March 24, 2008.

¹² [Iraq Coalition Casualty Count](#). Accessed December 5, 2008.

Sarah Palin

On the final days of the Democratic convention at the end of August 2008, a question on many people's minds was whether the Democratic Party could unite behind a single candidate. Ultimately, Sen. Clinton came onto the convention floor and dramatically called for a vote by acclamation. Obama won by unanimous voice vote. But there was still a rift. The organization appropriately named PUMA (Party Unity My Ass) grew as an anti-Obama arm of disenfranchised Clinton supporters. The Republicans, perhaps, saw a fracture among democrats they felt they could take advantage of.

The day after the Democratic Convention dismissed, and delegates and journalists were departing Denver, McCain announced his vice president pick in Dayton, Ohio: Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. The choice was a surprise to many; many news organizations had to struggle to find biographical information on the candidate. It had been suspected that Independent Joe Lieberman or former Republican Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge would be his choice, or possibly Governors Charlie Crist (R) of Florida, or Tom Pawlenty (R) of Minnesota.

Palin was quickly decried as inexperienced, emaciating McCain's experience argument against Obama. Joe Conason said in Salon magazine, "It is hard to think of a more cynical and contemptuous political act this year than John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate."¹³ She was able to energize the conservative wing of the Republican Party who had their doubts about John McCain. However, in a poll taken in the days after she was chosen, only 39% of voters said she is qualified to serve as Vice-President; a third said she wasn't qualified.¹⁴ Throughout the fall, Saturday Night Live's Tina Fey, an impersonator who actually very closely resembles Palin, did much to enforce the image of Palin as an airhead in over her head. By the end of October, 59% felt she was unqualified to be Vice-President.¹⁵ By picking Palin, McCain undermined his greatest strength against Obama – his experience, especially in national security matters. However, another issue was brewing.

The Economic Crisis

Less than two weeks before the first debate, the US Federal Housing Finance Agency placed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac under conservatorship. A week later, Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, Bank of America bought Merrill Lynch, and a few days later the New York Federal

¹³ Conason, Joe. "[McCain's Palin pick is the epitome of tokenism.](http://www.salon.com/opinion/conason/2008/08/30/palin/)" Salon. August 30, 2008.
<http://www.salon.com/opinion/conason/2008/08/30/palin/>

¹⁴ Page, Susan. "Poll: Voters uncertain on Palin." USA Today. August 30, 2008.

¹⁵ Cooper, Michael. "[Growing Doubts on Palin Take a Toll, Poll Finds.](#)" The New York Times. October 30, 2008.

Reserve Bank bailed out insurance giant AIG. It became abundantly clear that the game had changed.

On September 24, two days before the first debate at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, as Congress was working on a response to the economic crisis, Senator McCain announced that he was suspending his campaign, would return immediately to Washington to work on a bailout solution, and suggested the debate be postponed. McCain camp adviser Steve Schmidt had convinced McCain to go all in, to be bold, and seize the moment.¹⁶ The action caught the Obama campaign by surprise; Sen. Obama was waiting for a call back from McCain with a response to his proposal earlier in the day to issue a joint statement on the economic crisis. Fellow Democrats decried the action, calling it a political stunt.

McCain's effort to appear effective seemed to completely backfire. Despite his urgent tone, he didn't leave New York immediately, spending the night in the city and flying down the next morning. Further, he canceled a scheduled taping of the comedy show, "Late Night with David Letterman," instead taping an interview with newscaster Katie Couric. The campaign later said it was not a night for comedy, implying Letterman's show is not serious, even though McCain announced his run for president on the show the year before. The comedian was angered by McCain's sudden cancellation and contradictory behavior, and every night for a couple weeks, Letterman mocked McCain's actions. At noon on the day of the debate, just hours before departure, McCain announced that he would attend the debate. His actions signaled that the entire effort to rush to help with the bailout was a political stunt. McCain and his campaign's erratic behavior throughout this episode contrasted greatly with Obama's cool and collected image.

Together, these historical and situational factors – mostly beyond Obama's control – presented him with a favorable situation. But his victory is not merely a matter of luck, or due to the mistakes of the other side. He also made a series of decisions that paved a path to victory.

Smart Choices

At the Republican Convention in Minnesota, the GOP derided Barack Obama as a community organizer. In her acceptance speech, Vice President Nominee Gov. Palin quipped: "And since our opponents in this presidential election seem to look down on that experience, let me explain to them what the job involves. A small-town mayor is sort of like a 'community organizer,' except that you have actual responsibilities." However, it seems that being a community organizer is a pretty effective way to organize a presidential campaign. Obama organized his campaign much

¹⁶ Draper, Robert. "The Making (and Remaking) of McCain." New York Times Magazine. October 22, 2008.

the way he did two decades before in Chicago – by building networks of individuals. The difference is this time he had 21st century tools.

Campaigning 2.0

Obama's use of the internet and technology in his presidential campaign will be studied very closely by anyone considering running for office in the future. Over the nearly two years, his staff tinkered and tweaked with their internet, database, and networking technology, allowing them to communicate directly and effectively with voters.

Governor Howard Dean, in his bid for president in 2004, was successful in building an internet presence and using it successfully for fundraising. The Obama team, however, took this to the next level – not only creating a web presence and fundraising apparatus, but also using integrated databases to identify voters, especially new voters, and then communicate with specific groups within that list.

Taking this further, the campaign also opened their database to volunteers. This allowed volunteers to work from home. Logging onto barackobama.com, they could access a script, a list of phone numbers of prospective voters in their own neighborhood, and call on behalf of Obama. This led to substantial cost savings, for unlike campaigns of the past, it did not require as many offices and phone lines. This do-it-at-home model allowed Obama's million plus volunteers to help from anywhere, even allowing volunteers in safely democratic states such as New York apply their efforts in battleground states such as Virginia. Other volunteers traveled from safe states such as Maryland to battleground states such as Pennsylvania and Virginia.

This effort was combined with smart database management. As outlined in a Wired Magazine article in October 2008, depending on how a voter was listed in the database, they would receive either a call to remind them where to vote and when or an undecided voter would get a different message, or even a personal visit in order to persuade them to vote for Obama. McCain supporters weren't given reminder calls.¹⁷ This highly focused effort allowed the campaign to tailor the right message for the right time in order to build a rapport with potential and new voters.

Communication was not only online and in person, but also utilized new technologies of the web 2.0. One of the four founders of the popular networking site Facebook, Chris Hughes, worked for the Obama campaign.¹⁸ Using the portal my.barackobama.com, voters could contact one another, announce campaign events, and hold debate watching parties, and otherwise use the

¹⁷ [Stirland, Sarah Lai. "Obama's Secret Weapons: Internet, Databases and Psychology." Wired blog network. October 29, 2008.](#)

¹⁸ [Stelter, Brian. "The Facebooker Who Friended Obama." The New York Times. July 7, 2008.](#)

virtual world to organize the real world, all with the newest online networking tools such as Facebook, Myspace, and my.barackobama.com.

Using mobile communications was also novel for this campaign season. Before Obama announced his vice presidential pick, he requested voters sign up for a text message so supporters, and not the media, would be the first to know who his pick was. (The campaign used the text code 62662, which spells Obama). This allowed the campaign a new method of communication with voters. Throughout the campaign, before key dates, voters would get text messages reminding them to tune in and watch the debates, to register to vote before the deadline, or to vote early.

While most networks were built on the ground, nationwide, but particularly in battleground states, there were also numerous grassroots organizations with tailored messages. For example, Veterans for Obama or Jewish Americans for Obama would receive specific messages for those groups. The list of nearly two dozen sub-groups listed on the homepage included racial identity, Veterans, Seniors, Labor, Kids, Sportsmen, those with disabilities – and republicans.

It was a technological and personal integration, led by paid and volunteer staffers in numerous offices throughout the country, as well as through both official and ad hoc support groups that the campaign was able to build virtual *and* real relationships with people, even with largely different interests. He raised a circus like tent, with many poles – everyone under one roof, but each able to call a pole their own.

Fundraising & Foregoing federal funding

This database technology also allowed the Obama campaign to out raise his competitors. This was true early in the campaign as much as it was in the final days. In the first quarter of 2007, he raised \$25 million – almost as much as the Democratic frontrunner at the time, Hillary Clinton, who raised \$26 million – staking himself as a serious candidate early on, despite his relative outsider status. He did this, however, with twice as many donors – 100,000 to her 50,000.¹⁹ This allowed Obama to go back to those donors – whose average donation was below the maximum \$2300 donation – as opposed to Clinton, who had many more tapped out donors who could no longer give. This pattern continued throughout the campaign.

By November of 2008, post election campaign reports showed the Obama had raised approximately \$750 million. Of that, \$500 million came from online donations with an average donation of \$80.²⁰ Four years before, John Kerry and George Bush – together – raised only \$650 million. The proportion of small donors – those giving less than \$200 – was approximately the

¹⁹ Marinucci, Carla. "Obama's lucrative Internet campaign." San Francisco Chronicle. April 5, 2007.

²⁰ "Obama raised half-billion online." United Press International. November 21, 2008.

same as George Bush four years go. However, what distinguished Obama's fundraising effort was his ability to get people to donate multiple times.²¹ Like other outreach efforts, careful attention was given to exactly how many times someone had given, and matching challenges were issued to repeat givers and first time givers, with different pitches given to each side – not a single message calling for donations from all donors that was more typical of the McCain campaign.

Obama's ability to raise hundreds of millions of dollars after his nomination was a gamble that paid off. In June of 2008, he announced that he would not participate in federal campaign funding that would have provided him \$84 million dollars towards his general election campaign. The gamble was whether or not he could match or exceed that amount. In the last three weeks before election day, and days following the election, he raised \$104 million.

Obama's financial advantage over McCain allowed him to outspend his opponent by 4 to 1. McCain was limited to spending only the \$84 million dollars, while Obama spent \$315 million. The Republican Party spent money on McCain's behalf, totaling \$53 million dollars – but they could not match Obama's ability to spend. Obama also enjoyed a degree of freedom on where to allocate resources that McCain did not have. Because the Obama campaign controlled all of his funds, his campaign could dictate where resources would be spent – allowing him to shift into new battleground states as necessary (such as in North Carolina). Close to Election Day, Obama even began buying ads in Arizona, McCain's home state. Not only was McCain at a financial disadvantage, he also had much less control over the total campaign against Obama. While Obama had full control, McCain could only dictate how his allocated \$84 million could be spent. The Republican Party and other outside groups had to work independently from the campaign, as dictated by campaign law, leading to divisions on where to spend funds. Even within the campaign, there was an outcry when they decided to pull out of Michigan, ceding the state to Obama. Even Vice President nominee Palin said, "I fired off a quick email and said 'Oh, come on, you know, do we have to? Do we have to call it there?'"²²

Summary

Leading up to Election Day on November 4, thousands of people were turning out at polling locations. A total of 25.7% of the electorate voted before Election Day in 2008, compared to four years before when 22.5% showed up early to vote.²³ There were lines around blocks, and in several states as many as 70% of the electorate turned out early to vote. In the end Obama

²¹ Kuhnhenh, Jim. "Obama raised \$104 million towards election's close." Associated Press. December 5, 2008.

²² "Palin Shakes Up McCain Camp." NPR. October 5, 2008.

²³ McDonald, Michael. "2008 Early Voting Statistics." Accessed December 6, 2008.

garnered 365 electoral votes to McCain's 173. Obama won 28 states to John McCain's 22. A total of 53% of the electorate voted for Obama, while 46% chose McCain.

While Obama's message was inspirational, his speeches awing – and these are important in convincing people to vote for him – ultimately, what allowed him to win was a well organized campaign that began with relationships. Obama was able to build relationships with important advisors, fundraisers, volunteers, and individual voters. Everyone felt important, and a part of a movement. Because he had built a relationship, both virtual and real, with his supporters he could ask for money – donations forms started with \$5 suggested donations – and he could go back and ask for more.

While Obama was a special candidate, he was no messiah. He was well organized, consistently on message, made few mistakes, and otherwise ran a solid campaign that will be studied for years to come. This was combined with two foes – first Clinton and later McCain – who did make mistakes, who did change messages, and who had trouble consistently raising funds to match those of Obama. He is not perfect, but he won because he was cool headed, built strong relationships with smart people and average supporters, and brought together a solid team. Quite simply, he won because he was better organized. Barack Obama is not the messiah but the organizer-in-chief.