

Race and Joe Sixpack in the US presidential elections

SPINNING THE FACTS

Was former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani right when interviewed on National Public Radio the morning after Senator Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination? “Voters don’t vote on the issues, they vote on personality.” Or would American voters prefer to drown in a sea of economic, social, and diplomatic disasters than be rescued because the captain at the helm is deemed of the wrong race? What has happened to electoral politics that leads voters to choose the candidate who makes them feel more comfortable culturally than the candidate who can best handle the job? Yet, when asked, voters firmly assert that they have elected the most capable person to office.

Beginning with the 1980 presidential election campaign, the Republican Party ruthlessly pursued a political strategy of cognitive dissonance in order to wrest political control from the Democratic Party. Essentially communication persuasion techniques and propaganda, the politics of cognitive dissonance not only secured political dominance for the Republican Party, but also bifurcated and polarized the body politic along cultural lines (religion, abortion, gay rights, and race). Politics of cognitive dissonance unravelled the heretofore secularized policy process, causing partisan gridlock

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in legislative decision making and failures of governance from the Bush administration’s promulgation of war in Iraq and the political firings of eight Department of Justice lawyers to the abrogation of international law with respect to extraordinary rendition and torture.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY AND POLITICS

Cognitive dissonance, as Leon Festinger wrote in 1957, describes one’s need to establish consistency between one’s dispositions to act or behave (attitudes) and one’s beliefs and opinions. People will modify an existing belief or reject contradictory ideas when their behaviour is inconsistent with their attitudes in order to accommodate the discrepant behaviour by eliminating dissonant cognitions or adding new consonant cognitions. The most frequently used dissonance reducers include: denial (rejecting a fact too discomfoting to accept—“it didn’t happen”); dialectics (synthesizing opposing assertions or repeating contradictory/false assertions as true); non-denial (using words that are literally true to convey a false impression); and spin.

Often a derogatory term used in pub-

lic relations, “spin” is the act of presenting a biased portrayal by selecting or manipulating facts to advantage a person or situation. Although public relations relies on creative presentation of the facts, political spin usually involves disinformation, distortion, and deception. Politicians and strategists often are accused of “spinning the facts” by commentators and political opponents when they produce a counterargument or position. Spin techniques include: cherry picking (selectively presenting facts and quotes that support one’s position); “non-denial denial”; making statements that assume unproven truths; and using euphemisms (code words or double-speak) in place of words considered too harsh, politically incorrect, or offensive for public statements.

CULTURAL IDENTITY IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

The overly long 2008 primary season produced two dissimilar nominees with distinctly different platforms vying for the office of president of the United States: Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Barack Obama. Abetted by the media and led by Karl Rove, Republican strategists employed the politics of cognitive dissonance to divert voters’ attention from accurately assessing the candidates’ actual differences on policy issues by reinventing the records and credentials of both candidates and reducing good governance to voters’ attitudes on abortion, gay rights, race, and religion—in short, cultural identity.

Observers watched as media journalists and political strategists transformed voters’ views of Senator Obama from a “post-racial” or “a-racial” politician that more middle-class white voters found appealing than African-American voters

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into “the black candidate,” despite these voters’ misgivings about Obama’s “blackness” given his biracial origin and white upbringing. Until March 2008, most media coverage of Obama focused on his viability among African-American voters. Many asked whether Obama was “black enough” because he was perceived as representing mainstream issues rather than issues important to racial minorities. Consequently, Obama significantly trailed Hillary Clinton in support among African-Americans unconvinced of his ability to advance their interests until former president Bill Clinton’s racial gaffes on the eve of the South Carolina primary.

THE BATTLE FOR JOE SIXPACK

After African-American voters shifted their support in response to the Clintons’ contentious introduction of race into the campaign, Hillary Clinton strategists launched a “no holds barred” and “everything is fair game” attack on Obama. It targeted white, blue-collar voters in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, and West Virginia using euphemisms, fear, and cultural divisions of race, religion, class, and gender. When it became clear that Obama would secure the nomination, Republican strategists seized the Clinton gauntlet and “playbook,” employing code words, double entendre—“the working class,” “Real Americans,” “Joe Sixpack” aka gun-toting, white men—and dialectics that distorted Obama’s ethnicity as Arab Muslim and his membership in a church whose pastor preaches liberation theology as radical nationalism.

The McCain campaign promulgated an onslaught of negative ads that reinvented Senator McCain as the non-elitist, pro-life, anti-immigration conservative maverick and Senator Obama as the inexperienced, elitist, liberal, terrorist sympathizer who could not be trusted. Post-nomination, McCain became the “change candidate” who “put country first,” appropriating Obama’s bottom-up, “Yes we can,” “One America,” hope-for-change vision of American that the Clintons had dubbed “fairyland.”

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THE SUBDUED TIDAL WAVE

The actual role that race would play in the 2008 Presidential election was difficult to ascertain. Many African-Americans believed race was a potent factor evidenced by racial euphemisms: Obama’s “elitism,” “unflappable personality,” inexperience, white voters’ orthodoxy on “flag lapel pins” and “the *real* American people.” Assessing white voters’ perceptions was more difficult. On the record, pollsters found support for black candidates overstated because white voters are reluctant to admit racially tinged sentiments—the Bradley effect. In an interview with *New York Times* journalist Adam Nagourney, Michigan Republican Chairman Saul Anuzis said, “He’s become accustomed to whispered asides from voters suggesting they would not vote for Mr. Obama because he is black . . . [but] we honestly don’t know how big an issue it is.

Harold Ickes, a Hillary Clinton campaign strategist, admitted, “If he were white, this would be a blowout. I think the country has come a long, long, long way since the 1960s . . . but if you talk to people in certain states, they will say [it is] because of the color of his skin.” In a study of campaign media coverage by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, Robert Lichter noted a major turnaround in coverage for Obama after McCain and Obama emerged as front-runners in the early primaries. Obama’s on-air evaluations shifted from 62 percent positive to 28 percent positive and 72 percent nega-

tive, significantly worse than John McCain’s 43 percent positive and 57 percent negative.

Foremost, women Democrat voters viewed the election as a referendum on the American Dream—President George W. Bush’s tribalization of American politics—the choice between “voters who want to keep the Dream for a few and those who want to spread the Dream around.” According to one northeastern Women’s Democratic Club president, “two-thirds of women who supported Hillary shifted to Barack” and “Palin’s selection as McCain’s running mate alienated Republican women, especially working class women, shifting them to Obama as well.” Club polls indicated that Republican women were also crossing over to Obama because of his positions on wages, reproductive rights, and gender. This trend was substantiated in October 2008 polling by the *Wall Street Journal*/NBC and other organizations that showed support for McCain stimulated by Governor Palin’s entry slipping among working class women voters.

Despite the polarizing politics of cognitive dissonance, Barack Hussein Obama won the 2008 US presidential election. After polling places closed on election day, there was little evidence of either a Bradley effect or a PUMA (Party Unity, My Ass) movement of Hillary Clinton supporters abandoning the Democratic Party. Voters crossed over to Obama in increasing numbers as the economy melted down, Sarah Palin’s qualifications proved vulnerable, and the McCain campaign faltered and winnowed its own base. Many “post-machine” and machine Democrats, and Independents of all races, voted for Obama primarily because of his stances on the policy issues. Voters desired change and inclusiveness and voted for Obama in order to reclaim US foreign policy stature and, most important, to halt economic decline. Horace Mann, an educator and statesman who entreated on the obligation of citizen voters to vote the issue and the candidate, would be pleased by voters’ performance in the 2008 US presidential election. 