

# Notebook

## How Obama won

### James Crabtree

**Imagine a seesaw.** Now imagine an election. The parallels are clear. Two parties, broadly in balance, seek to bring the seat down on their side. But how? That the seesaw of American politics has just swung decisively in favour of the Democrats is not in doubt, bringing with it hopes of an end to the generation-long rise of conservatism, and a renewal of America's (unfinished) social contract. But understanding why the seesaw tilted progressive means understanding two larger changes, relating respectively to policy and organisation.

First, Obama's campaign brought to the fore a decade-long Democratic economic rethink, which in turn allowed it to respond quickly to voters' concerns about the credit crunch. Second, Obama's campaign managed to develop a new organising strategy, capable of motivating the Democratic base without frightening off independent and moderate voters, squaring a circle that had puzzled previous Democratic campaigns.

### Tipping the seesaw

American academic Thomas Shaller, the author of *Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win Without the South* (Shaller, 2006), argues that commentators see only one seesaw strategy: moving people from one side to the other (1). Shaller sees this as broadly analogous to attempts by both parties to attract independent, often conservatively-minded groups. But this is only one of four possible ways of winning the seesaw battle. In addition, the application of momentum, thrusting down to provide extra weight at the right moment, can tip the balance. Thirdly, others can be persuaded to join one side or other. And finally, in a more complicated piece of engineering, the fulcrum can be moved towards either side, creating a structural imbalance.

If the first move corresponds to appealing to independents, the second and third closely resemble getting out the vote, and enlarging the pool of available voters through, for instance, voter registration drives or persuading younger voters to vote for the first time.

The fourth – long-term structural change in the make-up of a nation's politics and electorate – is the most tantalising. In the UK the sale of council houses, for instance, moved the fulcrum of politics to the right. Likewise, in the US, Republican attempts to create a permanent majority, or political realignment, have sometimes focused on the gerrymandering of congressional districts. Equally, such a structural change can also come from an intellectual imbalance – as was the case with American liberalism until the 1970s, and conservatism thereafter.

Assessing Obama's victory means examining his progress against these four measures, and especially examining whether his victory, and the governing project coming from it, is likely to herald such a new realignment.

## **An inevitable victory?**

Obama's victory on each of the first three measures is clearly remarkable. The facts are now familiar, but worth repeating. Obama won a majority of the popular vote, only the fourth Democrat in American history to do so, and the most decisive Democratic victory since LBJ. He won African Americans overwhelmingly, and substantially increased the Democrats' majority amongst important swing demographics, in particular younger voters and Hispanics. And exit polls showed the Democrats easily winning the seesaw battle, taking independents 52 to 44, and moderates (who make up nearly half of the electorate) by a massive 60 to 39.

Obama's ability to win over moderates and independent turned, in particular, on the rising importance of the economy during the campaign. US elections can be divided between those dominated by either domestic or foreign concerns. Democrats rarely win the latter.

Iraq was seen as the election's defining issue during the Democratic primaries. This benefited Obama, and harmed Clinton. It also gave McCain an opening, given his early support for the surge and perceived credibility on foreign policy issues. In December 2007, during the run-in to the primaries, a *Los Angeles Times* / *Bloomberg* poll confirmed that 32 per cent of Americans saw Iraq as the election's defining issue. The economy (25 per cent), health care (19 per cent) and terrorism (18 per cent) came next (2).

But, as the contest continued, and with Obama's victory over Clinton, the war's salience decreased quickly as economic worries moved up the agenda. By the time Lehman brothers went bust in mid-September 2008, the economy had become voters' overwhelming concern. Exit polls left little room for doubt. During 2004 priorities had split roughly evenly between Iraq, terrorism and 'moral values'. In 2008 more than six in ten ranked the economy top. Only one in ten cited Iraq.

From this perspective McCain's defeat begins to look inevitable. This dramatic increase in the salience of economic concerns left him with little room for manoeuvre. His claims to be a candidate with 'experience' fit for troubled times were undermined by Palin. Republicans were left without a convincing economic narrative, hampered both by Bush's unpopularity and their uncritical view of the market.

Yet it is worth remembering that, only a few short weeks before the election, McCain was ahead in the polls. Boosted by a 'Palin bounce' his once floundering campaign had clawed its way back into the race. Democrats, gathered in Denver in late August, were worried about their poll numbers, and nervous for their candidate's prospects. Ultimately it was the banking crisis rather than the efforts of the Democrats themselves that turned it around. The sudden reality of the downturn, crystallised by Lehman's collapse and further focused by brinkmanship over the first Paulson bail-out plan (and McCain's blunder in 'calling off' his campaign) all ensured that the American public – and especially independent and moderate voters – were more ready to listen to Obama's message in the campaign's final weeks.

## **The economic rethink**

So it was the economy wot won it? Yes and no. At a deeper level, Democrats were better able to respond to the election's late economic turn because of underlying changes in their economic thinking.

Democrats had noticed that a number of crucial economic relationships seemed to have broken down (see for instance Shapiro, 2008). The Bush years had seen fast produc-

tivity rises, but these increases were not matched by increases in wages for the average worker. Equally, economic growth no longer seemed to translate into robust job creation. The US economy shed jobs at record rates during the post-9/11 technology bust, while the recovery saw rates of job creation significantly lower than in comparable periods during the plentiful Clinton years. The breakdown of these twin relationships called into question the most fundamental economic orthodoxy of all: that a rising economic tide would, as in the 1990s, lift all boats.

This debate about economic fundamentals was further focused by new debates about economic inequality and trade policy, both in turn tied into a wider concern about America's economic place in a quickly globalising world.

Inequality had risen quickly during the Bush years, with a seemingly extraordinary portion of increases in national wealth pocketed by the top 0.1 per cent of the population. An influential paper by economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez used tax receipt data to show significant increases in wealth for the top 1 per cent of Americans, and even faster increases for the top 0.1 per cent (Piketty and Saez, 2004). The very rich, it appeared, were making out like bandits at a time in which ordinary Americans were suffering. The paper led to a public debate about the causes and consequences of inequality, in which economists like Paul Krugman debated the relative effects of trade, globalisation, returns to skills, and the declining bargaining power of labour (3). While not conclusive, the debate brought forward the idea of income inequality as a political problem in need of a solution.

At the same time a similar, linked debate was underway about the impact of free trade. Trade liberalisation was an article of faith for centrist Democrats under President Clinton, who viewed the passing of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 as a signature achievement, and often credited the agreement for much of the economic success during the subsequent decade. Just before the 2004 election Nobel Laureate Paul Samuelson – perhaps the most famous living mainstream economist – came out against this consensus, with an article in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Samuelson, 2004). Samuelson's arguments did little more than restate the economic case that free trade can both increase aggregate welfare and not benefit all participants. Writing in the *New York Times* he noted that 'being able to purchase groceries 20 per cent cheaper at Wal-Mart does not necessarily make up for the wage losses' resulting from international competition.

Samuelson's contribution opened up a wider debate, in which centrist economists and labour leaders alike began to question both the gains from trade, and the extent to which losers were adequately compensated. The debate was given added impetus in 2006 when another impeccably centrist economist, Princeton's Alan Blinder, published an explosive article in *Foreign Affairs* (Blinder, 2006) arguing that around fifty million American jobs, or thirty to forty per cent of the total, could be outsourced in coming decades, including 28 to 42 million in the service sector.

These twin debates – about the fundamental workings of the economy, and the relative importance of issues like inequality and trade – combined to move the median ground of Democratic economic debates to the left. Policies long advocated by liberal thinkers and trade union leaders began to gain more mainstream acceptance, ranging from wage insurance schemes and increased trade adjustment assistance, to labour and environmental criteria in trade agreements and higher marginal tax rates on the super rich.

And it was this process of rethinking that allowed Democratic economists faced with

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the beginnings of the credit crunch to quickly jettison any number of previous orthodoxies, and take seriously the need for bank bailouts, stimulus packages, tighter regulation – and, crucially, a new, slightly more circumspect view of the market. This meant the Democrats were well placed to respond to voters' economic concerns. Granted, the white working class – among them the downscale Democrats who sided with Hillary Clinton – still voted for McCain by eighteen points. And the split between the American south (which went heavily for McCain) and the rest of the country (which went for Obama) grew. But Obama handily won independent voters, and even made up ground from previous elections with many conservative-leaning groups, including white evangelical Protestants and 'exurban' voters, both seen as crucial parts of President Bush's coalition. Meanwhile he was also able to turn out the Democratic base in record numbers: younger, highly educated, urban voters came out in droves.

And in so doing so he managed unusually to square a difficult circle of American politics: winning over swing voters, but also motivating his base. The conventional wisdom posits this as a strategic choice, in which a candidate must pick one but not both. Bill Clinton might be seen as an example of the former strategy. Howard Dean can be seen as an example of the latter, as might the campaign President Bush ran in 2004. Centrist Democrats tend to be sceptical of electoral strategies promoting a liberal, or progressive platform, aimed at energising natural supporters. Liberals dislike the centrist's tactic of cleaving to the middle; a move they argue tends to downplay the Party's most important principles. But Obama's campaign, uniquely in modern American history, did both.

### **A new kind of organisation**

How did he pull off this feat of electoral gymnastics, and in turn tip the second and third parts of the electoral seesaw to get out the vote, and enlarge the pool of possible supporters? The answer is found in the campaign's innovative organisation, which successfully merged the 'Clinton' and 'Dean' strategies.

Some excitable claims notwithstanding, Obama's campaign, unlike Dean's, was not primarily a liberal, 'bottom-up', movement-driven effort. They kept a strict message of 'hope and change', and ran a strictly disciplined team, with few leaks and tight control on policy. Obama was not afraid to tack to the right if needed – for instance, in his early decision to come out in favour of automatic death sentences for child rapists. And if the message was tight, the financial discipline was, if anything, tighter, raising half a billion dollars from three million donors in less than two years. A mix of traditional high dollar donations, and an aggressive use of email, did much of this. (The campaign's email list, harvested throughout the campaign, ultimately topped thirteen million. Howard Dean never managed one million.) Meanwhile, his campaign outreach was still based around a centralised voter registration files – known as the 'Voter Activation Network' database.

Obama's campaign was, then, a model of professional politics, quite different from previous disorganised Democratic efforts (for more detail see Anstead and Chadwick, 2008). Underneath, however, it followed strategies that did indeed owe a debt to the movement-driven politics beloved of both Howard Dean supporters and the 'netroots' movement. Its real innovation, however, came not in its use of technology, but its adoption of old-fashioned techniques of community organising.

The campaign invested early in developing a cadre of both paid and volunteer organisers, many of whom were schooled in a number of 'camp Obama' training facilities, influenced by the organising theories of Harvard University's Marshall Ganz (see Ganz, forthcoming). These volunteers were sent back to their home areas and tasked with establishing parallel groups of volunteers. These local cells in turn recruited further volunteers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those recruited were quickly given responsibility, promoted, and often hired – creating a sense of empowerment and involvement. Perhaps the most important result was a substantial increase in 'neighbour-to-neighbour' contact, learning the lesson of successful Republican tactics in 2004, and the failure of Democratic efforts in 2004 to bus thousands of out-of-town students into swing states.

Zack Exley, a former Labour Party strategist and now head of the New Organising Institute, wrote before the election of the 'huge risk for [Obama's] national field program to have paid staff take the time to methodically build volunteer teams instead of rushing directly to spend all their time running voter contact activities themselves'. He claims the campaign risked 'everything on the effectiveness of masses of volunteers, then ... risked everything again by relying on volunteer teams to lead those masses' (Exley, 2008).

And it was only after these groups were in place that the campaign could put them to work, enabled in part by a new set of sophisticated organising and social networking tools, based around the website MyBarackObama.com – or 'MyBo' for short. In particular, the campaign's Voter Activation Network was able to provide local organisers with the ability to build voter contact lists, develop neighbourhood walk-lists and call swing voters directly. Jon Carson, Obama's national field director, quoted in the *Washington Post*, said the campaign was able to build a high-tech 'grass-roots, volunteer-driven' effort because of the 'sheer volume of the people who wanted to get involved and the technology making it easier than ever before to find us' (MacGillis, 2008); something simply not available to previous campaigns.

In the past the Republicans had a clear advantage in using new organising techniques to identify and mobilise new voters. This time the balance swung back. The combination of volunteer organising and smart technology allowed millions of phone calls, door-knocking drives and Get Out The Vote efforts in the campaign's final days to take effect. Beginning in his victory in the Iowa caucuses, running through his primary victories in smaller caucus states, and ending in his victories in a number of normally red states in the election itself, Obama proved the power of a new type of political organisation.

### **A liberal revival?**

It was this that made the difference in Obama's attempts to register new voters and get them to the polls – the second and third of Obama's seesaw tactics. But what of the fourth? Was there much in the campaign to suggest an electoral realignment, or a process that might shift the fulcrum of American politics in a more liberal direction?

Certainly, the fundamental disjuncture of the current economic crisis opens a new space in which liberal thinkers' market scepticism and proposals for state intervention will be more readily listened to. Demographic trends, ranging from the fast-rising populations of Hispanics, to the increasing importance of educated, liberal urban elites, are suggestive of a new governing coalition to replace that brought together by FDR. The American

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public, meanwhile, seem unlikely to veer to the right wing after a decade in which Bush's brand of cowboy conservatism hobbled the titans of Wall Street and reversed their country into an economic crisis.

But this is to say nothing more than that the ground looks fertile for a liberal revival. The ultimate goal – rebuilding America's fragmented social contract, rebalancing its economy, and taking action on pressing issues, in particular energy and climate change – will come from an aggressive governing agenda only. Without one, Obama's extraordinary campaign will have been for little, and the seesaw of American politics will soon swing back once again.

**James Crabtree** is a senior editor at *Prospect* ([www.prospect-magazine.co.uk](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk)) and an Associate Editor with *Renewal*.

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### Notes

1. Shaller was speaking at a seminar run by the New Democrat Network in Autumn 2005. I am grateful for the insight, and mentioned it in a previous *Renewal* article (Crabtree, 2006).
2. <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti2.htm>
3. For a review of Krugman's recent thinking see Ben Jackson (2008) in *Renewal* 16 (3/4).
4. Available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/10/11/AR2008101102119\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/10/11/AR2008101102119_pf.html)