That’s Entertainment: Politics as Theater in Campaign ‘08

Jon Perr
February 5, 2008
A Wildly Unpopular President

In general, do you approve or disapprove of the job George W. Bush is doing as president?
## A Clear Democratic Advantage?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Dem</th>
<th>Rep</th>
<th>Adv.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval Rating (1)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Presidential Preference (2)</td>
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<td>Congressional Preference (3)</td>
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<td>Party Identification (4)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Social Security</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>+18</td>
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<td>Corruption</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Immigration</td>
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<td>Iraq</td>
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<td>Taxes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Security</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Remember:
This Man Was Elected...Twice
It’s Intensity, Not Propensity

- Voter intensity more important than majority preference
- Critical in low turnout elections
- Key is getting half of the half that vote
- Mobilizing single-issue groups essential

Source: United States Election Project, George Mason University
It’s the Culture War

- Social issues trump economic self-interest
- GOP uses politics of division and the wedge issue
- Resulting policies hurt working Americans
- Example: 17 state same-sex marriage ban initiatives in ’04 and ’06
It’s the Mental Model

- People vote their values, not interests or issues
- Lakoff’s “framing”
  - conservative “strict father”
  - liberal “nurturing parent”
- Westen’s “political brain”
  - hearts over minds
  - emotion over reason
It’s Entertainment!

- Oversupply of media sources
- Concentrated media ownership
- Politics must compete for mindshare
- News, opinion and politics merge as just another form of entertainment
- Media presents issues in terms of conflict and confrontation
- Politicians must be performers
# Shifting Political News Sources

## Where the Public Learns About the Presidential Campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Regularly learn</th>
<th>Something from...</th>
<th>Local TV news</th>
<th>Cable News Networks</th>
<th>Nightly Network News</th>
<th>Daily Newspaper</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>TV News Magazines</th>
<th>Morning TV Shows</th>
<th>National Public Radio</th>
<th>Talk Radio</th>
<th>Cable Political Talk</th>
<th>Sunday Political TV</th>
<th>Public TV Shows</th>
<th>News Magazines</th>
<th>Late-night Talk Shows</th>
<th>Religious Radio</th>
<th>C-SPAN</th>
<th>Comedy TV Shows</th>
<th>Lou Dobbs Tonight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign year</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>38</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

## Main Source of Campaign News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>First source</th>
<th>Second source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
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<td>Magazines</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* First or second mentions

Source: Pew Research Center, 1/11/08
Rise of the Infotainment Complex

- Decline of traditional media
  - local news, newspapers
  - national TV news
- Rise of new formats
  - cable news
  - talk radio
  - role of TV talk shows
- Explosion of Internet
  - online news sites, video, blogs, podcasts
  - impact by age group
- Audience self-selection
Two - and Only Two - Sides
Good vs. Evil Dramas

“Wanted Dead or Alive”

“Bring ‘Em On”

12 Year Old S-CHIP “Fraud?”

John Kerry “Swift Boated”
Conflict and Confrontation Sells

- Success of conservative radio
  - 91% of weekday content\(^1\)
  - 76% in top 10 markets

- Leading cable news shows\(^2\)
  - Fox News still #1
  - led by O’Reilly Factor

- Partisan publishing houses

- Even C-SPAN\(^3\)
  - 51% of think tank coverage is right wing; 31% “centrist”

Sources: 1. Center for American Progress (2007); 2. TV Newser (January 2007); 3. CEPR (2007)
The TMZing of Politics

Hillary’s Cleavage

Obama Girl

Hillary’s Laugh

John Edwards’ Hair
Politics as a Performance
No War on Christmas Here
What Voters Are Worried About...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Important Issue</th>
<th>Pct.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Creation/Economy</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illegal Immigration</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy/Cost of Gas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment/Global Warming</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy/Iran</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Wall Street Journal/NBC News Poll, 1/22/08
Isn’t What to Expect in 2008

- The tactics
  - “Barack Hussein Obama”
  - “President Hillary Clinton”
  - “socialized medicine”
  - “The party of Bush”

- The strategies
  - preemptive vote suppression over mythical “fraud”?
  - GOP obstructionism or “do-nothing” Dem Congress?
  - debate over economy or illegal immigration?
  - Iraq/national security redux?
Implications of Politics as Theater

- Distorted debates
  - “uncertainty” over global warming
  - half of Americans still believe Saddam had WMD

- Hyperpartisanship
  - conflict leads to gridlock
  - key issues, crises unresolved

- Increased cynicism
  - distrust of political leaders, parties & the press
  - potential for decreased turnout

Source: 1. Harris Poll (July 2006)
Signs of Hope

• Record turnout
  – in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina
  – “youthquake” among 18 to 29 year olds

• Internet organizing
  – rise of the “Netroots”
  – unprecedented mobilization, fundraising

• Citizen journalism
  – new engagement, accountability from blogs, etc.
  – George Allen’s “Macaca moment”