



## **That's Entertainment: Politics as Theater in Campaign '08**

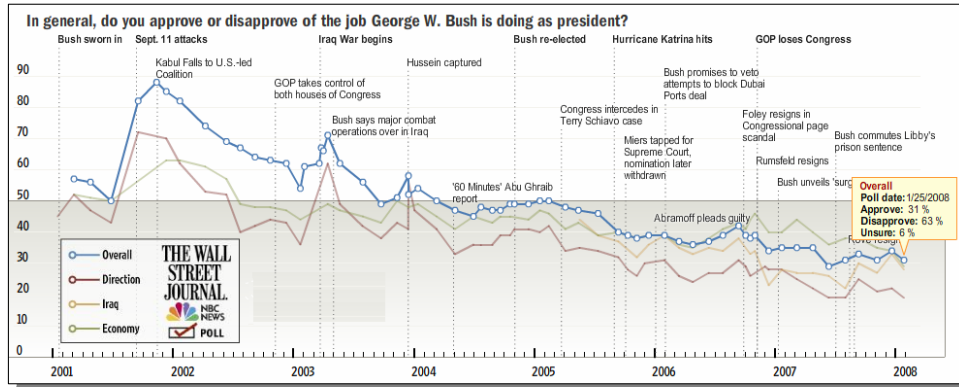
**Jon Perr**  
February 5, 2008

[Perrpectives.com](http://Perrpectives.com)

- I'm Jon Perr.
- Since today is Super Tuesday, I'd like to discuss how American politics is being transformed into entertainment.
- But before I get started, I should mention that over the years, I've helped a number of Democratic candidates, most of whom lost, often by shockingly large margins.



## A Wildly Unpopular President



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- Let's begin with the starting point of the 2008 campaign for both parties.
- In a nutshell, George W. Bush is slightly more popular than the Ebola virus.
- Americans see his presidency and the direction of the country as a disaster.



## A Clear Democratic Advantage?

Metric	Dem	Rep	Adv.
Approval Rating (1)	55	42	+13
Presidential Preference (2)	50	32	+18
Congressional Preference (3)	43	38	+5
Party Identification (4)	36	34	+2

Trust on Issues (5)	Dem	Rep	Adv.
Health Care	57	33	+24
Social Security	53	33	+20
Education	52	34	+18
Corruption	42	29	+13
Education	48	35	+13
Immigration	44	32	+12
Iraq	47	39	+8
Taxes	48	40	+8
Abortion	45	38	+7
National Security	43	43	0

Sources: 1. Gallup 1/13/08; 2. CBS 1/12/08; 3. Rasmussen 1/20/08; 4. Rasmussen 1/4/08; 5. Rasmussen 11/23/07

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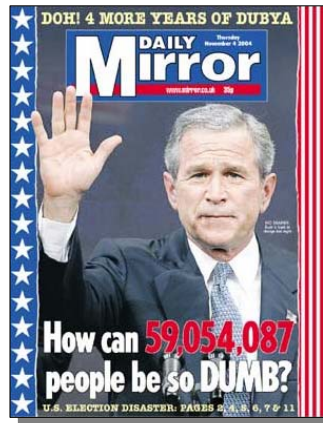
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- On paper, all signs point to a Democratic victory.
- Americans prefer Democrats to Republicans in generic presidential and Congressional polls...
- ...and trust Democrats more on almost every issue.
- So, in theory, this fall Democrats can look forward to a sweep...



## Remember: This Man Was Elected... Twice



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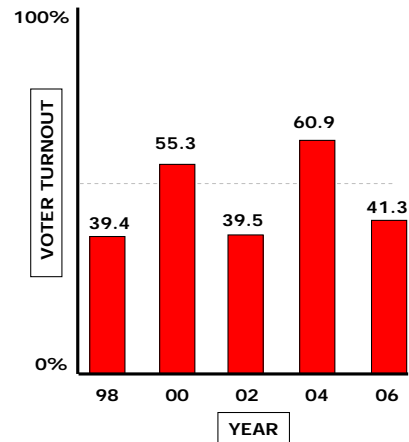
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- Then again, maybe not.
- So the question is:
- How do you account for election outcomes so at odds with the preferences of a majority of the American people?
- Tonight, I'd like to look at a few theories, including one of my own.



## 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

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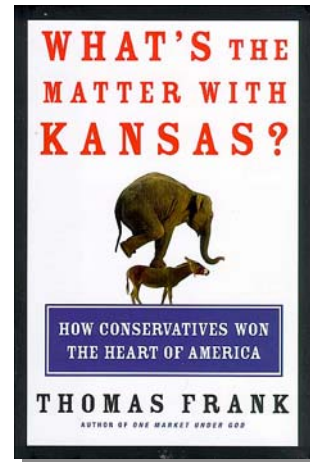
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- One explanation is voter intensity versus propensity.
- That is, how strongly a key group feels about an issue is often more important than what a majority of Americans believe overall, especially in low turnout elections.
- What matters is the half of the half that vote.



## 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



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- Which brings us to the impact of the Culture War.
- In a nutshell, social issues often trump economic self-interest.
- It's no accident that the GOP put same-sex marriage bans on the ballot in 17 states.



## 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



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- Now, progressives often say, "we'd win if we did a better job educating people."
- Not so, says linguist George Lakoff.
- Republicans often win, he says, because they consistently frame issues in ways that speak to voters' values and emotions.



## 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

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- But these theories largely ignore the changing media environment...
- ...where politics must compete for Americans' mindshare.
- As a result, news, opinion and politics merge as just another form of entertainment.
- And often, it's the best show that wins.





# Shifting Political News Sources

Where the Public Learns About the Presidential Campaign	Campaign year		
	2000	2004	2008
<i>Regularly learn something from...</i>	%	%	%
Local TV news	48	42	40
Cable news networks	34	38	38
Nightly network news	45	35	32
Daily newspaper	40	31	31
<b>Internet</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>24</b>
TV news magazines	29	25	22
Morning TV shows	18	20	22
National Public Radio	12	14	18
Talk radio	15	17	16
Cable political talk	14	14	15
Sunday political TV	15	13	14
Public TV shows	12	11	12
News magazines	15	10	11
Late-night talk shows	9	9	9
Religious radio	7	5	9
C-SPAN	9	8	8
Comedy TV shows	6	8	8
Lou Dobbs Tonight	--	--	7

Main Source of Campaign News	Feb	Jan	Jan	Late Dec
	1996	2000	2004	2007
<i>First source mentioned</i>	%	%	%	%
Television	73	68	68	60
Newspaper	15	15	15	12
Internet	1	4	6	15
Radio	8	8	7	8
Magazines	1	2	1	2
Other	1	2	1	1
Don't know	1	1	2	2
	100	100	100	100
<i>First or second mentions*</i>	Feb 1996	Jan 2000	Jan 2004	Late Dec 2007
Television	75	86	78	72
Newspaper	49	36	38	30
Internet	2	7	13	26
Radio	18	14	15	13
Magazines	4	3	2	4
Other	1	3	2	3
Don't know	1	1	2	2
	150	150	150	150

Source: Pew Research Center, 1/11/08

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- Behind this transformation is a dramatic shift in Americans' sources of political news.
- Americans are rapidly moving away from the Big 3 networks, local news and newspapers...
- Instead getting their campaign news from cable news shows and the Internet.



## 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



You Tube



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- As a result, Americans now confront what I call the “Infotainment Complex.”
- That is, the lines between news, opinion, entertainment and politics are disappearing as cable news, talk radio, blogs, online video and TV talk shows compete for our attention.



## Two - and Only Two - Sides



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- And when politics is entertainment, the first thing that suffers is the truth.
- Now, issues are presented as having two – and only two - sides.
- Fox, CNN and MSNBC alike bring in partisans on each side to battle it out.
- And the loudest, most aggressive guest who is declared the winner.



## Good vs. Evil Dramas

"Wanted Dead or Alive"



"Bring 'Em On"



12 Year Old S-CHIP "Fraud?"



John Kerry "Swift Boated"



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- Nothing sells at the box office better than the conflict between Good versus Evil.
- So few blinked when President Bush sounded like something out of a spaghetti western.
- And even war heroes and children can be demonized.



## Conflict and Confrontation Sells

- Success of conservative radio
  - 91% of weekday content<sup>1</sup>
  - 76% in top 10 markets
- Leading cable news shows<sup>2</sup>
  - Fox News still #1
  - led by O'Reilly Factor
- Partisan publishing houses
- Even C-SPAN<sup>3</sup>
  - 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)

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- Conflict doesn't only make for good theater, it makes for good business.
- As Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly attest, being an Oxycontin addict or a sexual harassment defendant is no barrier to success.
- Conservative shows dominate.



## The TMZing of Politics

Obama Girl



Hillary's Cleavage



Hillary's Laugh



John Edwards' Hair



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- Politics is becoming just another part of celebrity culture.
- Each of these so-called stories was covered by the national media.
- Was Hillary Clinton's laugh sincere? What message did her low-cut blouse send to voters?
- Inquiring minds want to know.



## Politics as a Performance



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- To earn media praise for being “authentic,” politicians must become performers.
- So what if Mike Huckabee wants to take America back to the Middle Ages, he plays a mean bass.
- Doing the talk show circuit and celebrity endorsement events is now required.



## No War on Christmas Here



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- There may have been no better illustration than the campaigns' Christmas ads this year.
- Each offered holiday greetings to voters in Iowa, New Hampshire and online.
- It's not hard to see why Rudy Giuliani won a grand total of 1 delegate.





## What Voters Are Worried About...

Most Important Issue	Pct.
Job Creation/Economy	26%
Iraq	17%
Health Care	17%
Terrorism	10%
Illegal Immigration	10%
Energy/Cost of Gas	7%
Environment/Global Warming	6%
Foreign Policy/Iran	5%
Other	2%

Source: Wall Street Journal/NBC News Poll, 1/22/08

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- As the presidential primaries heat up, the economy is now the dominant issue in the campaign.
- It now tops Iraq and terrorism among both parties.
- But what voters care about most won't necessarily be reflected in the campaign this fall.



## ...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?

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- Instead, we'll get catch-phrases and false conflict.
- Democrats will no doubt try to brand the GOP “the party of Bush.”
- And expect Republicans to try to mobilize their base with three words:
- “President Hillary Clinton.”



## Implications of Politics as Theater

- Distorted debates
  - “uncertainty” over global warming
  - half of Americans still believe Saddam had WMD<sup>1</sup>
- 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)

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- So what happens when a well-informed citizenry becomes what Al Gore termed “the well-amused audience?”
- We get partisan conflict and gridlock.
- And voters may not only get turned off, they’ll get the issues wrong...
- ...as the Saddam WMD saga sadly shows.



## 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”

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- But there are signs of hope.
- Turnout in 2008 is breaking records, especially among young voters.
- The Internet is changing the playing field.
- Just ask Virginia Senator George Allen about his YouTube “Macaca Moment.”
- Now that’s was entertainment.