

# The 2008 Elections and What We Thought We Knew

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: December 10, 2008 03:37 PM

Now that the presidential campaign of 2008 has been over for more than a month, it is possible to begin to get some perspective on that extraordinary election. All presidential elections are different and, almost by definition, historic, but this one was particularly groundbreaking, not just because of Obama's victory but because it forces us to rethink many of our assumptions about presidential elections. Many of the things that strategists, pundits and other observers knew about presidential elections were proven wrong during the last twelve months.

First, and most obviously, the 2008 election obviously proves wrong any notions that America was not ready for a non-white president. Obama's election will put an end to that line of fruitless, self-defeating and occasionally racist thinking. There are still other barriers that need to come down with regards to the presidency. For example, Obama's victory meant that we did not get our first woman president, but Clinton's campaign, although not successful, on balance, probably moved us closer to electing a woman president. Obama's victory also opens the doors for other non-white candidates, from both parties.

The Republican Party clearly should rethink a few things after this election as well. Actually, they should probably rethink many things, but for reasons of space, I will focus on one—the relative strength and import of the socially conservative wing of the party, which has been its electoral base for decades. If 2008 was not a good year for the Republican Party, it was an even worse year for the Republican base. First, after a brief and not intensely competitive primary season, the party nominated a candidate who was uniquely, if inexplicably, disliked by the party's socially conservative and evangelical base. The ease with which McCain won his party's election is evidence that the strength of social conservatives, even within the party, was probably overstated. After seeing their party nominate a candidate with no organic connection whatsoever to the base, those voters got another chance to show their strength when McCain decided, undoubtedly due at least somewhat to pressure from his party's conservative base, to nominate Sarah Palin who was extremely popular among these voters. The Palin nomination may not have cost McCain the election, but it clearly didn't help. Thus the base first demonstrated that it was not strong enough to exercise de facto veto power in a nominating process, and later had it demonstrated that their views and positions were essentially anathema to the broader electorate. Serious Republican strategists will be wise to focus more on expanding the party's appeal and worrying less about the base.

Some Democratic Party strategic assumptions were similarly challenged this year. For decades it has been taken as an absolute given that a successful Democratic ticket must have regional diversity. This was a polite way of saying that it must have at least one moderate southerner on the ticket. Since 1944, the only years when the Democrats did not have a southerner or somebody from a border state on the ticket were 1968 and 1984. They lost both these elections. In 2008, the party nominated a ticket with two northern liberals, but still won a decisive victory.

This certainly shakes up one of the basic assumptions upon which the Democratic Party has based its strategy for a generation. Interestingly, this all northeastern ticket won three states and 55 electoral votes in the south indicating that there is more than one way to win in the south and that the south, like the rest of the country, is changing.

In general, the 2008 election proved that neither party really has a template for electability anymore. In previous decades, those Democrats who were interested in electability tended to support primary candidates who were southern, preferably governors and moderate on social issues. The prototype for this was, of course, Bill Clinton. While these types of candidates were not always able to win the nomination, they were always seen as the most electable by party insiders. By this criterion the most electable candidate in 2008 was John Edwards, who finished third in the primaries, before being rocked by a scandal that would have most likely cost him the election had he been the nominee.

For the Republicans, the notion of electability was never quite as clear, but generally Republican candidates needed to have a socially conservative record, but a personal style that somehow made them seem moderate. Reagan, and Bush in 2000, best fit that template. McCain seemed to be cut from a similarly electable cloth, but even though on balance he may have done about as well as could be expected by a Republican, it is unlikely that many Republican insiders will continue to seek out candidates like him.

After 2008, we no longer know what electability means for either party. The Democrats succeeded with two northern liberals, one of whom was African American while John McCain made it clear that gruff but occasionally likeable tough guys are no longer enough for the Republican Party, but his primary victory also indicates that Republican nominating processes may be more open than we have thought. This recent election showed us that many old assumptions about presidential elections are wrong, figuring out the new assumptions, and the new political world in which we are living, will be essential to the future success of both parties.