

# **We Still Know Some of the Things We Knew**

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The 2008 presidential election may have been the beginning of a new era in presidential politics where assumptions and ground rules which we have known for decades will have to be revisited but, in at least some respects, the 2008 election looked quite similar to other recent elections. At least some of the things we knew about presidential elections remain relevant even after this election that seemed to have changed everything.

This election again confirmed the central import of fundraising in presidential campaigns. Barack Obama's record shattering fundraising was a key piece of his election victory allowing him to not only dominate the airwaves and other paid media, but to implement his campaign's brilliantly planned field campaign. Perhaps more importantly, Obama's early fundraising success in 2007 allowed him to position himself as the only serious challenger to Hillary Clinton. As of the end of 2007, Obama had raised \$101.4 million, while Clinton had raised \$104.5 while all the other Democratic candidates combined had raised less than \$75 million. In the Democratic nominating season of 2008, early fundraising clearly was still the first primary and helped narrow the field quickly to two candidates. By early 2008, Obama began to consistently raise more money than Clinton, making it possible for him to overcome the advantages that Clinton, as the early frontrunner, enjoyed.

For the Republicans, fundraising was somewhat more complex. McCain was the early frontrunner, but stumbled badly in the first half of 2007. Clearly, early money was not as important for the Republicans. Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani both had raised more money than McCain going into 2008. Although the comeback from the brink of collapse in mid-2007 became a driving narrative for the McCain camp during the short-lived Republican primary season, it now seems relatively clear that the lack of discipline and focus which made it difficult for McCain to raise more than \$37 million before 2008, also characterized a campaign that could neither stay on message or avoid making rash decisions.

One of the reasons early fundraising remained important this year was that the primary schedule was changed again going into 2008, becoming more frontloaded than ever. Interestingly, even with the new schedule, Iowa and New Hampshire still mattered. For many people, Obama's victory in Iowa is what made him seem like a plausible candidate for the first time, rather than just an interesting side story to the bigger story of Hillary Clinton's nomination. Correspondingly, McCain's victory in New Hampshire put him back in the Republican race again and on a swift route to his party's nomination. Candidates who built strategies that did not include on winning one of these states, most notably Rudy Giuliani, or who were unable to win either of these states, such as John Edwards, saw their campaigns end quickly after the New Hampshire primary.

The reasons for the persistent import of these Iowa and New Hampshire are not obvious.. The media and punditry all was aware of the front-loaded schedule and the relatively small size of

these two states, but the narratives in 2008 with regard to Iowa and New Hampshire, with several candidates being in a do or die situation in one of these states, was similar to what we might have seen in 1976 or 1988. Thus, on the Republican side, for example, after Huckabee and McCain won Iowa and New Hampshire, with Romney coming in second in both, it was almost as if Rudy Giuliani, only a month removed from being the front-runner and still a popular figure nationally, no longer existed for many in the media, punditry and blogosphere.

Although there was a sharp anti-intellectualism and contempt for book learnin' from the McCain-Palin campaign, and even at times in the Democratic primary from the Clinton campaign, the 2008 election again saw the country elect a president who was educated at elite private universities. From 1948-1988, we only had one Ivy League educated president, John F. Kennedy, but since 1988 all of our presidents have had at least one Ivy League degree. Obama, oddly enough like President Bush, of course, has two, and has also taught law at a third leading university. So, in the year of Joe the Plumber, Americans again showed a preference for our most elite academic institutions.

Lastly, the 2008 election also proved that one of the most fundamental rules of American politics -- that if the economy is in bad shape and the country is stuck in an unpopular war, the incumbent party will not get reelected. It is not possible to isolate reason while Obama was able to win such an initially unlikely election, but it seems relatively certain that these factors were important. McCain's ignorance of economic matters would not have been such a big problem for him had the country been in good shape economically. Similarly, McCain's never-ending discussion of the success of the surge might not have fallen on deaf ears from most of the electorate if the war in Iraq was not already so wildly unpopular. These big picture events framed the 2008 election, and Obama's victory like they frame every election.

The 2008 election saw a well-financed Ivy League educated candidate win the Iowa caucus and go on to defeat the nominee from the incumbent party at a time when the country was mired in an unpopular war and an imploding economy. This may not be the dominant narrative, or the most exciting angle on the recent election, but it is still an important one, which may tell us more than we would expect about how much has or has not changed in our political system.