

Forget the Retail Politicking: Presidents Are Made Wholesale

By David Paul Kuhn

The charm of the primary-state glad-handing shouldn't obscure television's power in shaping presidential preferences



Image credit: Reuters

All presidential politics is wholesale. Every four years, the media parachutes into Middle America. There are reports of fried butter sticks or fried Twinkies. We watch on television as pols flip burgers or trudge through the snow glad-handing voters. Pundits gauge how well pols sell salt of the earth. And we are told this retail politicking is the stuff that can make or break presidential wannabes.

It's not. Wholesale politics pays more dividends even inside the early primary proving grounds -- Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. Herman Cain rose from political obscurity, in mid August, to lead Iowa by the close of October. Yet he only visited Iowa once over that period.

Mitt Romney has remained among the top contenders in Iowa despite rarely visiting the state himself. Newt Gingrich is the candidate du jour, though he lost key staff months back. Gingrich climbed ahead nationally, as he did in Iowa, because staffing was beside the point. Gingrich sold on television. Meanwhile, Rick Santorum recently completed an old-fashioned barnstorm of Iowa's 99 counties; his poor poll numbers have not budged. (It's worth noting, as the Hawkeye hype ramps up, that winners of the Iowa caucuses failed to win their parties' nominations from 1984 to 1996.)

Debates have rarely mattered more in a modern primary contest. But the debates ultimately exemplify the larger lesson of every cycle: presidents are made wholesale.

Rick Perry rose and plummeted in Iowa, as he did nationally, despite his relative absence from Iowa. The press fixated on the personable Perry when he was on top, though he ascended before campaigning in key primary states. Once he was on top, the Associated Press, in a typical story, reported that Perry's "charm has been on full display in Iowa and New Hampshire, where voters demand a personal approach and judge candidates in part on their pizzazz." Or at least Iowans say they do.

Charisma does count. On television. Cain's charm translated on the tube. Cain's launch was also aided by his 9-9-9 tax plan. Catchy numerical plans are as suited to mass marketing a politician as they are to selling pizza. And Gingrich's rise to the top of every poll that matters has been fueled by his nationally televised debate performances.

The rise of the television age, particularly cable news, broadly coincided with the modern primary system. Jimmy Carter cemented Iowa's importance in 1976. Yet Carter notably placed a distant second behind "uncommitted" that year. The lesson of Carter was not that winning Iowa counts. It was that

winning the expectations game counts. Self-proclaimed "comeback kid" Bill Clinton proved that same point with his second place finish in New Hampshire in 1992.

Retail politics has long been the sideshow of the Big Show. In the month ahead, we will read assessments of Republicans' voter mobilizing operation. Romney had the best operation in 2008. He invested \$10 million in Iowa. And he still lost.

Retail candidates make good characters. Characters make good stories, good television drama. But they often do not win.

Joe Biden was the premier Democratic retail salesman of 2008. He camped in Iowa. Yet Biden won less than one percent of the Iowa vote. Biden earned the great consolation prize because the professorial Hyde Park candidate needed some Scranton on the ticket (read: on television), even with historic winds at his back.

Barack Obama won the presidency. And Obama is no retail pol. This is why President Obama struggles to convey the spirit of these hard times. Candidate Obama was best in televised debates or speaking before thousands. He soared, critically, because the product also fit the audience. He was the first modern Democrat to win college-educated whites and blacks in the primary. Obama also monopolized the most powerful of political brands: change. Obama was mass marketed as a wholesale elixir. Choose the change you desire. Obama will cure it.

In 2008, Mike Huckabee was Republicans' best retail pol. Huckabee, however, still languished in single digits until his second place finish at the ultimate foe retail event, the Iowa straw poll. The straw poll is the quintessential expectations game. Ron Paul's second place this year earned a collective shrug. The press was used to Paul winning straw polls.

As with today's GOP candidates, Huckabee's strong debate performances fueled televised momentum. But the product was central to its sales here too. The former preacher dominated the conservative Christian constituency, six-in-10 GOP caucus-goers that year.

Recall the pol who steamrolled through the 2004 Democratic primary states. He must have been a

brilliant retail salesman. It was, instead, the stiff erudite Brahmin, John Kerry. Kerry couldn't sell electricity in a blackout. Al Gore, ditto. A memorable lede, circa February 2000, by then-*New York Times* reporter Melinda Henneberger: "Even with Michael S. Dukakis nodding off in the second row, Al Gore kept talking." But Gore still won Iowa and the nomination.

Dukakis caused people to nod off himself. He smartly sought to turn that vice into virtue. "After seven years of charisma, maybe a little competence is in order in the White House," went a Dukakis applause line. Of course, George H.W. Bush was no backslapper either. Yet Bush's cardboard demeanor was enough to win the presidency.

Junior had the talent for retail. Nonetheless, George W. Bush rose in 2000 with a wholesale campaign. An instructive *Boston Globe* report from October 1999: "Call [W. Bush] the phantom front-runner: the candidate who easily dominates the polls here, yet has made fewer trips to the first-in-the-nation primary state than any other candidate except Utah Senator Orrin G. Hatch."

But.

Bill Clinton. Pundits forever obsess over Clinton's campaigning. He may be the best retail pol in decades. But the hard data illustrates that a recession and Ross Perot had far more to do with the making of that president.

Retail skills count. If you cannot sell yourself on a small stage, you cannot sell on the national stage. But the product must fit the marketplace. The Internet age adds a viral complement to the wholesale mediums of television and radio. But online micro marketing is merely a cost-efficient means to target the parts in order to win the sum. It's not as if pols are personally instant messaging voters (LOL).

Presidential politics has long been this way. Dick Gephardt won the Iowa caucuses in 1988. "Iowa prided itself on being one of the last great showcases of 'retail' politics in America. Iowans do not buy their politics from TV, they sniffed," reported the *Los Angeles Times* that year. "But that reputation may suffer, thanks to Gephardt. His closing campaign of emotional, populist-flavored television advertisements coincided with his recent explosion in the polls. Ed Campbell, former state Democratic Party chairman, says of Gephardt's surge: 'It could only be his TV.'"

It's still TV. Two thirds of Americans continue to receive most of their news from television, even as Internet use rises, according to the Pew Research Center.

"How many people have you met one time in the past year? You can't remember. What if one of those people could speak in your living room every night?" asks Alex Castellanos, a leading Republican media strategist. "Herman Cain does not visit Iowa but in one [Sean] Hannity appearance," on Fox News, "he speaks to 25 percent of Iowa caucus goers."

Handshaking hasn't a chance. Consider diner glad-handing. It typifies retail politics. The diners are, notably, always on the public schedule. Cameramen set up before the candidate enters. Press handlers assure photographers get their shot. If a pol campaigns in a diner without the media present, has he really campaigned in a diner?

No. Even retail politics must sell wholesale.

Image credit: Reuters

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/12/forget-the-retail-politicking-presidents-are-made-wholesale/249581/>