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Democrats' Year: Less Change Than Chance

By **David Paul Kuhn**

The 2008 campaign did not make history. It was made by history. Conventional coalitions and events elected Barack Obama.

Looking back, there remains a disconnect between the myth of the 2008 campaign and what occurred. Some history was made. After 43 white men, a black man will be president. A woman almost was president. And because of Hillary Clinton, we likely will not ask next time whether a woman can be president.

Now Democrats are thinking in far grander terms. Obama's victory is said to signal the resurrection of the liberal era. Obama is to enact what George McGovern began, similar to what Barry Goldwater accomplished for the coalition conceived by Richard Nixon and eventually brought to fruition by Ronald Reagan.

The far-reaching question in politics, as we consider what 2008 will mean in the years ahead, is whether America recently witnessed one of the nation's half dozen "critical elections," with the "sharp and durable" results that signify party realignment.

We are still living on V.O. Key's terms, the twentieth century political scientist who popularized the theory of party realignments. Not long after Key, Kevin Phillips predicted, and played a part in, the "Emerging Republican Majority." At the turn of this century liberal analysts John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, seizing on the same cycle, wrote "The Emerging Democratic Majority." It predicted that 2004 would bookend the Nixon-Reagan coalition. After John Kerry's loss, the authors later argued that the 2001 terrorist attacks merely delayed the inevitable.

There is a peculiar tide to presidential politics. Since the time of Jefferson and Jackson, one party has generally governed Washington for 32 to 36 years. The minority party has its interregnums. Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton were moderate Democrats in a GOP era. Dwight Eisenhower was a moderate Republican in Democrats' time.

In this rhythm, what should have ended by 2004 perhaps was delayed by September 11th. A president has never lost a campaign in wartime. It would be the same for George W. Bush. And perhaps, with those attacks receded from the American mind, what Nixon began, Bush finished.

Not entirely. It was seven years and four days after the Twin Towers were struck, only blocks away from Wall Street, that the worst stock market crash since the Great Depression assured the Democrats' rise.

The impact of the economic collapse remains underestimated. It was not just part of the story of this year in politics but rather the keystone event. Without it, Obama could have lost. We now could be discussing whether John McCain might repeat William McKinley's feat and extend one Republican majority to another.

But the collapse did come. Obama won. And Democrats have been given their chance to govern.

What gave Obama his moment was a remarkable confluence of events. Yet already, the influence of these exceptional events--Iraq, Katrina, the financial crisis--are in some sense forgotten. A string of hyperbolic conclusions have been reached about what Democrats won in 2008. Indeed, an industry of Obama books, now being written, depends on exaggerating what Obama accomplished this past year. Obama is said to not have merely won the presidential race. He is said to have changed our map, our culture and our politics.

The suggestion behind this view of 2008 is that the party that wrestled with why it had lost seven out of ten presidential elections now need only focus on the one it won, and the coalition that might follow.

The past always has a way of catching up with progressives. And in time, it will for Democrats. The implosion of the Republican Party deserves bookshelves of postmortems.



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But it's in victory that there has been a dearth of Democratic introspection. For liberals, expectations of 2009 are already beginning to ferment based on how they have chosen to interpret 2008.

Perhaps this is the dawn of a new Democratic era. If true, liberals are left with another question: why did it take two economic catastrophes to create the two Democratic coalitions of the past century?

After all, if it's fair to say September 11, 2001, was a political gift to Republicans, then September 15, 2008, was no less a gift to Democrats.

2008: The Overrated Campaign

The Dow Jones Industrial Average dove 41 percent only three years after Hoover, in his convention speech, declared the nation's "final triumph" over poverty. America's celebrated architect was blamed for the country's collapse. His name became a synonym for hard times. Shantytowns were now "Hoovervilles" and newspapers were "Hooverblankets." One man bit into an apple, found a worm and shouted "Damn Hoover!"

Not since 1931 has the Dow Jones fallen as it did in 2008. Like Franklin Roosevelt, Obama had the good fortune to run in bad economic times. He did beat out a heavily favored opponent in the primaries, smartly targeting the caucuses. But Obama would not have won the Democratic nomination if not for the demographics he embodied and very possibly would not have won the presidency if not for the market collapse.

The Democratic primary is often recalled in epic terms. Yet the winner of nearly every primary could be predicted by the states demographics. In Pennsylvania, when Obama campaigned as hard as he ever had and outspent Clinton by at least three fold, he lost. It was not money or rhetoric that moved most votes, but how personally vested voters were in their candidate's victory. There were too few blacks, too few college educated youth, to overcome Clinton's coalition of women, the working class and seniors in Pennsylvania.

Obama luckily had caucuses, which favored the activist candidate in a year when liberal activists were emboldened. Even in the Iowa caucuses, however, young whites played a key role for Obama. Caucuses though alone could not win the primary for Obama. In so many primary contests he won, particularly in the South, he had his overwhelming black support to thank.

As with most supposedly unprecedented events of 2008, this tribalism has been endemic to Democrats since they lost their majority. As early as 1968, after Eugene McCarthy won the Oregon primary, Robert Kennedy said, "Oregon, a fine state"-- but a campaign aide recalled him stating, "It just doesn't have enough poor people, black people, or working people."

Obama won because he was an exception. The candidate who appeals to upper class college-educated Democrats--from Gary Hart to Paul Tsongas to Bill Bradley--was never able to win the majority of blacks to compensate for working class losses. Obama's race broke this Democratic law. Like the general election, his race proved to be not a weakness but a strength.

Once Obama finally did win the nomination, he inherited political winds that Gore and Kerry must deeply envy. The GOP brand had imploded. The Republican president was one of the most unpopular since the advent of polling. The Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina had sundered perceptions of GOP strengths; security and management. And the economy was flagging. Yet all that, combined with Obama's personal appeal, gave him only a narrow lead in June and July.

By autumn, the race was tied and the electoral map looked like 2004.

September 15 changed all that. Soon after, for the first time, states from Florida to North Carolina to Indiana moved to Obama's electoral coffer. McCain's comment on September 15 that "the fundamentals of our economy are strong," and his later inability to recall how many homes he owned, certainly helped Obama paint McCain as out of touch. But no words could have compensated for three in four voters believing the nation was "seriously off on the wrong track."

It was not Obama, his hundreds of millions spent, his army of supporters, the conventions or debates that expanded the electoral map. It was the economic crisis.

Many forget, after all, where McCain stood before the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers. Gallup measured McCain ahead for 9 straight days until September 15. After that day, McCain never again led Obama. Obama had only won a majority once before September 15th. And that was at the peak of his convention bounce. After the stock market first crashed, Obama surpassed or met that 50-percent threshold 33 times.

If Obama's white support alone remained where it was prior to the financial crisis he would have won by less than a percentage point. Add Hispanic and Asian support pre-September 15, and Bush might be leaving office with the ultimate victory - a successor of his own party. And the Democrat now celebrated for his discipline would be facing

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harsh criticism for not adjusting to a changing campaign.

Instead, Obama needed only to stand still and let the "perfect storm," as one of Obama's advisers described it to me, take hold.

What Changed?

For as bad as the political environment was for Republicans, the remarkable fact of the final tally is not the extent of Obama's victory but rather its limits.

Obama's victory was average by historical measure. Of the 26 presidential campaigns in the past century, 13 candidates won a larger portion of the vote than Obama and 12 candidates won a smaller share.

To be sure, Obama's majority was the largest Democratic win since Lyndon Johnson's landslide. That tells us more about Democratic failure at the presidential level than Obama's achievement.

This is not to take away from Obama's historical significance. He symbolizes democratic enfranchisement like no president-elect since Andrew Jackson. Obama personifies the nation's capacity to correct itself. And he embodies the possibility of the American dream.

That's quite a bit. And thus far, that's also the limit of his historical significance. We are still living in the same political construct.

The stubbornness of our electorate remains underappreciated. Recall the media speculation about inaccurate pre-election polls. The reason pundits gave, absent evidence, was that Obama was going to vastly reshape American voting patterns. But of course, that too was exaggerated.

In general, much of what many pundits said would change in 2008 did not. After the collapse, turnout was predicted to be historic. In reality, voter turnout rose merely a percentage point compared to 2004. The religion gap did not shift at all with whites; most highly religious voters again went red and most highly secular voters again went blue. Even Obama's fundraising, bigger than ever before, was not new. Obama stood on the shoulders of Howard Dean's effort four years ago.

Obama did however impact two blocs. Blacks turned out at record levels, rising two points in the electorate and voted near uniformly for Obama. Obama's youth mandate--his margin with voters under age 30--was three times larger than any newly elected president since tracking became possible in the post-war era. This was the extent, as turnout expert Curtis Gans put it, of the "Obama phenomenon."

Obama's margin with Hispanics, by contrast, was not his doing. It grew with the economic collapse and was rooted in the immigration debate. Latino Protestants were especially impacted. More than half of Hispanic Protestants backed Bush in 2004. This year, two thirds of them backed Obama. Obama eventually won Hispanics by a two to one ratio. But even that mark remains a smaller share of Latino support than the Democratic nominee earned in 1988 and 1996.

In the end Obama gained only a percentage point or two with whites, compared to Gore or Kerry. When Obama and Gore are contrasted, 2000 being the last open seat race, Obama won slightly more men than Gore and lost slightly less women. The two generally offset each other. Factoring in sampling error as well, it's fair to say Obama performed at par with whites compared to recent Democratic nominees.

Democrats' White Problem

Shortly after Election Day, Obama's strategy team spent thousands of dollars to gain exit poll data. They focused primarily on whites. After all, Democrats' capacity for realignment depends on it extending its borders. The only room left is with whites, still three of every four voters.

Obama needs a landslide in 2012--akin to Roosevelt in 1936, Nixon in 1972 and Reagan in 1984--to prove that he shapes history rather than is shaped by it. He needs a landslide to prove he has begot a sustainable Democratic majority. And to do it, he must eye what no Democrat has with men or women since Lyndon Johnson's landslide--winning a majority of whites.

The question for much of the political year was not how well Obama would do with whites but how badly. Pundits were fixated on whether Obama would do worse with whites because he was half black, despite the so-called Bradley effect having been extinct in American politics for well over a decade. By Election Day, whites voted as they said they would.

Between 1984 and 2004, Democrats have had a modest strategy with whites. The campaigns depended on winning enough white women to offset losses with white men. In a two-man race, that tactic never succeeded. Despite the facts, Judis and Teixeira argued for its continuation as a guiding strategy. They particularly focused on educated white women, whom Democrats have won even in GOP years like 1980.

It's true that Democrats generally do better with college-educated whites. But it's hardly true for men as compared to women, a striking feature of Democrats pervasive white male gap.

Obama won college educated white women by 5 points and lost working class white women, of which there are more, by 19 points. Meanwhile, Obama lost college educated white men by 12 and working class white men by the same margin as women, 19. This pattern was true for Gore and Kerry as well.

In reality, Democrats should have finally discarded their gender and education strategy following the 2000 campaign. That year, Democrats split white women but lost white men by 24 points. The tactic left little margin for error. Democrats had to compensate for its huge deficit with white men by bolstering its support with all other groups. And cycle after cycle proved that the party's strength with women was not sufficiently offsetting its weaknesses with men.

The financial crisis altered this dynamic. The 2008 exit polls demonstrate that Obama was able to win white men, working class and not, but generally not white women. This is true in part because Republicans have been trouncing Democrats with white men for so long. There was more room to improve.

Only one third of white men supported Obama before the financial crisis, based upon Gallup's tracking. Those were dire numbers. Walter Mondale like numbers.

But after September 15 Obama became the first Democrat since Carter to rise beyond the 38 percent ceiling with white men. On Election Day, Obama won 41 percent of white males. That shift meant millions of votes and proved vital to expanding the electoral map.

What happened? Democrats always had two roads to make gains with these men. They could consider why, from Roosevelt to Carter, they once successfully competed for their support. Alternatively, the party could hope a dramatic event flipped the paradigm of American politics. It was the latter that occurred in 2008.

Cultural, social and security issues generally drive the making of the president--not economics or class divisions. That is, until Americans start losing more than a third of their savings in the stock market just as the value of their home plummets. Debates on national security or culture, which once led many white men to divorce Democrats, were smothered by the gravity of the economic collapse.

Still, a movement of three points does not a majority make. It helps. And in the end, narrowing the white male gap helped Obama. Meanwhile, Obama's gains did not translate to white women.

Sarah Palin was perhaps a small factor. But when pollsters asked voters whether they had a favorable view of Palin, it turned out that she was a more divisive figure with women than with men. The same woman who inspired Republican women drew ire from their Democratic counterparts. Male and female independents appear to have also sided with Democrats, with one-fourth viewing Palin as an "important factor" in deciding their support and three-fourths of them backing Obama.

Obama's failure to make inroads with white women begins with Democrats strength. Obama did not exceed Gore's performance with college educated white women. In fact, with the exception of the Midwest, Obama did only as well or worse than Kerry with these women. Even those white educated women living in the suburbs, the so-called Soccer Moms, voted no more for Obama than they had for Kerry.

For more than half of the 21 weeks of the general election, running from June 9 to November 2, Obama and McCain roughly split white women's support. All the while, according to Gallup's weekly averages, Obama never led with white women. McCain's lead only broke into double digits once, to 11 points, and that was when McCain was pulling ahead in early September. After September 15, for seven weeks, white women again split between the nominees. But by Election Day, McCain gained ground. Obama earned 46 percent of white women's support and lost them by 7 points. Gore, by comparison, earned 48 percent of the white female vote but only lost them by 1 point to Bush.

Disgruntled Clinton voters may have played a part. Fully 16 percent of McCain voters said they would have voted for Clinton and 53 percent of them were women. Still, one cannot assuredly translate that finding into votes. What we can say from polling is that Clinton likely would have done a few points better than Obama with white women.

Obama's women troubles were not uniform. In the East, Clinton country, Obama split working class white women. Kerry won hardly more than a third of these women. It's one more reason that education is a poor filter for targeting whites.

In fact Obama made double-digit gains with working class white men living in cities, better than he did with those who were college educated. With western whites, Obama did as well with women as Kerry. Yet Obama surged almost 20 points with working class white men in the West. At the same time, he made no gains with their college educated counterparts in

the region.

Nationally, Obama also improved more with young working class men than those who are college educated. The opposite was true for young white women.

White men were always the more fluid group in the general election. From the start of the Democratic convention to the close, Gallup found that Obama made no gains with white women. By contrast, over that period, Obama narrowed McCain's lead with white men from 20 to 11 points. By September 15, it was McCain who had the Joe the Plumber problem.

But what if the economic crisis had not occurred? It's fair to say that many commentators and reporters would have likely blamed latent white racism for Obama's failures. Whites of course did not forget Obama was half black on September 15. Still, racism played a role in the Deep South. And it would be the New York Times that exaggerated that role.

Obama, the South and Race

It was the poor performance of Obama with southern whites that led the Times to headline a front-page story "For South, a Waning Hold on National Politics." The piece argued Obama did worse in the South compared to other regions because of lingering racism.

Obama performed roughly as Kerry and Gore did in the South overall. More so, Obama's gains in the non-South with whites were within a couple points of Obama's gains with Southern whites. Therefore, considering recent contests, there was no Southern phenomenon in 2008.

In fact, compared to Kerry, Obama did as well or better with every class of whites in the South except working class white women (where he dropped a meager four points). Though, Obama decreased a couple points with working class white women in the non-South as well. Obama also gained more with working class white men in the South than East or Midwest.

In general, the most conservative region of the country decided to stay conservative. One man's change is another man's apostasy. The Times' article lacked context.

Nevertheless, the results in the region for Obama were no less grim. Like Kerry and Gore, Obama won less than three in ten working class Southern white men and women.

There are many reasons, outside of racial politics, that Democrats struggle in the South. Nationwide, for example, Obama slightly improved with college educated white men in cities and suburbs but won the same share as Kerry in rural areas. More compelling, half of social conservatives live in the South and Obama made no gains with them.

The Times though focused on race. Republicans ascended in the South, it argued, "by co-opting Southern whites on racial issues." That may agree with conventional wisdom. But it's also simplistic. Following the Civil War, the first large Republican gains in the South were made by Hoover in 1928, when he won half the South purely with cultural populism.

Hoover however only won in the Peripheral South. Deep South whites were so racially monomaniac that it was the only region to stick with Al Smith. And to be sure, the Catholic New Yorker was not of Mississippi stock.

The Times article itself focused on Alabama, for good reason. Alabamian white women and men voted 9 points less for Obama than Kerry. Mississippi and Louisiana followed a similar pattern, as did Arkansas with white women alone. But in the Peripheral South--states like Texas, Tennessee, Virginia or North Carolina-- Obama performed as well or better than Kerry with whites.

There has long been a divergence on racial issues between the Deep South and the Peripheral South. As in 1928 with Smith, the region backed Strom Thurmond in 1948 and Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George Wallace in 1968. Yet, as noted in Earle and Merle Black's "The Vital South," even Southerners Thurmond and Wallace could not win more than 10 to 25 percent, respectively, of whites in the Peripheral South.

For the same reason, Ike won across the Peripheral South in 1952 but not in the Deep South. In fact, Humphrey performed worse in the Deep South than Obama would four decades later.

We saw the same failure of context in the primaries. Many analysts were startled that greater diversity did not breed less racially divisive voting patterns, as one article in the *New York Times Magazine* argued. Generally, it was the Deep South that saw the nation's greatest racial gap in the Democratic primaries. That too had precedent. For the most part, as noted in the Vital South and by others, the higher the black population in a Southern state the greater the white vote for Thurmond, Goldwater and Wallace.

This leaves us where we have long been. Race remains a divisive issue in the Deep South, where it likely impacted white votes. But in the Peripheral South, from North Carolina to Florida to Texas, Obama saw more gains with groups of whites than in states like Ohio or

Nevada. Democrats' ambitions in the nation's largest region, where clearly the party can make gains, will depend upon the realization that the South is not as homogenous as its detractors paint it.

Cultural Issues on Hold

Contests consumed with social issues preceded both the 1932 and 2008 campaigns, as liberals were undone by Republican cultural populism. Smith and Kerry were, like so many Democrats between them, portrayed as against traditional values, as too urbane, effete, Hollywood-like to embody Americana. That both were Catholic impacted Smith but likely not Kerry. Soon enough, in both times, the nation was jerked from boom times to bust and so was its politics.

So we return to early September. Recall Palin's lauded convention speech. Nearly every criticism she made was culturally oriented. It followed a script that had long undone Democrats. And thereafter, Obama was off-kilter. But then lipstick on a pig, not the most gripping cultural debate, turned to Lehman Brothers.

Some progressives have already interpreted Obama's win as evidence that cultural issues are not what they once were. Obama perhaps has gotten the message. He has already caused his first cultural debate, selecting social conservative leader Rick Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration. Portions of the Democratic base are outraged. In the coming years, Obama will likely face larger fights with his base.

In 1983, one survey of 350 conservative leaders found that almost two-thirds of respondents believed that Reagan had not carried out a conservative agenda. Then too, Reagan's base rumbled that the president had stacked his cabinet with moderates and not true believers. There were later questions of orthodoxy, as Reagan raised taxes after he cut them. He spoke for social conservative values but did not push for policies to enact those values.

For many progressives, Obama is to be the rebuttal of Reagan. It was with Reagan that the counter to the counter culture matured and the nation was firmly center-right. Many liberals now argue that Obama's victory signifies the nation's reversal, to center-left.

If this specious analysis takes hold, like the view that cultural debates are merely vestiges of an age of Nixon, Reagan and Bush, it will serve to quickly deflate Democrats' big tent. Realism is the requisite of majorities.

At the end of the summer, the Pew Research Center's annual study on religion and culture found that voters were more socially conservative than liberal. The report concluded that Americans "moral values" were nearer to McCain than Obama.

By Election Day, majorities in California, Arizona and Florida approved gay-marriage bans. And in a post-election Pew report on media coverage, it was found that social issues--like gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research --comprised less than one percentage point of all campaign news (no doubt a low point in modern politics).

It's not that the economic crisis led many voters to conclude that cultural debates are silly (and especially on the left, where there is evidence it drives more votes). It was again that the economic crisis was the sole issue. Fully 63 percent of voters chose the economy as the issue that most concerned them. Number two was the war in Iraq, at 10 percent. Whites, women more drastically than men, reflected the same pattern. By contrast, in 2004, more voters selected "moral values" than the economy. Terrorism was not far behind.

It was the "moral values" question in 2004 that began an Apollo like project in the Democratic Party to close the religion gap. The effort involved Obama and showed no success in 2008. Whites who attend church at least once a week voted no more with Obama than they did for Kerry or Gore.

Cultural issues have also not been forgotten, merely set aside for now. Precisely one third of all white female and male voters said the quality that mattered most in their candidate was that he "shares my values"--more than "bring about change," or "right experience" or "cares about me"--and about seven in ten of them supported McCain.

Absent September 15, Obama was on pace to have many of the same cultural problems as Democrats before him.

The Potential Democratic Realignment

Political tectonics do not always shift with earthquakes, as in 1932. Obama's margin of victory was modest. But then, Nixon began his majority with less.

In other words, Key's requirement that party realignments have "sharp" contours is not absolute. Looking ahead, Obama's youth mandate and the GOP's Hispanic problem are signs that Democrats do have demographics on their side.

It's also notable that a slim majority of voters, 51 to 43 percent, believed "government should do more to solve problems." In 2000, the reverse was true.

Party identification has also shifted from parity in 2004 to favor Democrats by 7 points, although Democrats had twice that advantage in 1980.

Surely disheartening for Democrats, there was no rise since 2004 in the portion of Americans who call themselves liberal--a fifth of voters. One third of the electorate continues to identify as conservative.

It was moderates, constituting twice the portion of liberals in the electorate, who were vital to Obama's victory. Moderates favored Democrats by 9 points in 2004 and 8 points in 2000. This year they favored the Democratic nominee by 21 points.

And therein lies Democrats newest dilemma. The election of 2008 still has not brought a strong majority of Americans to their side on cultural issues, identity or even the role of government (51 percent is a tenuous hook on which to hang a new New Deal).

Consider the economic bailout. Fully 56 percent of voters "opposed" the \$700 billion government check to the financial industry. It is rare that Americans favor big government. Even at the height of the Great Society, one 1966 Gallup poll found that less than half of Americans supported LBJ's antipoverty programs. In later years, the liberal mandate narrowed as liberals narrowed the beneficiaries of their mandate.

So we wait to witness how Obama will interpret his mandate. All we have thus far is his Cabinet. And in a town where personnel is policy, it's a sign of moderation and wisdom.

Perhaps if Obama passes national health insurance it will, like the G.I. Bill, bring an entirely new swath of the middle class to believe they have a stake in big government as well. Perhaps if he does add millions of new federal jobs, Obama will come to be viewed by many Reagan Democrats, yet to return, as their "patron saint," as the late conservative leader Jerry Falwell described his father's view of Roosevelt. And perhaps, if Obama succeeds in Afghanistan, Democrats will regain some footing on national security issues.

Historian H.W. Brands notes that the "high tide of liberalism" in the twentieth century coincided with the high tide of the Cold War, which was at its core a rally toward a federal endeavor that carried Americans trust in government from tragedy, the Depression and World War II, to relative peacetime and prosperity.

Opportunity though is not destiny. One party's implosion does not assure the ascension of another. The Whigs fall in the mid-nineteenth century did not give Democrats the majority.

In the years to come, Democrats will also have to sustain a coalition in good times and not depend on bad times to undo the GOP. Unlike Roosevelt, Obama will only get two terms. There will be no chance for him to become the father of an entire generation of voters. And Obama's great strengths, immense youth and black support, are not the assured inheritance of his successor. But his weaknesses just may be.

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