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CHAPTER SIX

The Conventions and Debates

ANDREW WROE

The 2008 party conventions and presidential debates were among the most eagerly anticipated in U.S. electoral history. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought tooth and nail in the closest primary race in memory, setting the stage for a tense, emotional, and potentially self-destructive Democratic convention in late August. The rival candidates' undoubted star power and Obama's oratorical gifts added luster to an already intriguing event. On the other side, Republicans were less enthused by John McCain, but Sarah Palin energized the ticket and electrified the convention with her keynote speech. Adding further spice to the mix, Hurricane Gustav threatened Katrina-scale destruction on both a physical and psychological level, reminding voters of the party's and its leaders' inadequate response to the wreckage in New Orleans.

Over eleven days between the start of the Democrats' convention and end of the Republicans', Obama and McCain traded insults and leads in the opinion polls. The contest appeared too close to call, but McCain's fortunes declined as the economic crisis intensified during the three-week period separating the conventions and debates.

The debates offered McCain three opportunities to close the small and by no means insurmountable lead enjoyed by his opponent. In addition, the Sarah Palin–Joe Biden vice presidential debate generated more interest and press coverage than any before it, in part because of Palin's explosive and polarizing arrival on the national stage but also because of the contest's continuing closeness.

Conventions and debates generally don't determine election outcomes, but they had the potential to do so in 2008.

The Conventions

The nominating conventions for the Democratic and Republican parties mark the start of the national presidential campaign in the United States. They are an indelible landmark on the U.S. electoral map, but it was not always this way. In the early years of the republic, members of Congress chose presidential candidates without recourse to a partywide convention. But dissatisfaction with the process—because it violated the separation-of-powers principle, was undemocratic, and regularly produced outcomes that even caucus members found unpalatable—led to the introduction of national nominating conventions in the 1830s. The modern conventions that we see on television developed only slowly thereafter.

Emmett Buell divides the history of the convention into three eras: 1836–1908, 1912–68, and 1972 to the present day.¹ In the first era, delegates, largely under the control of party leaders, or “bosses” as they were known, came together from across the country every four years to discuss, dissect, and even physically fight over rival candidates before selecting a nominee. Corruption and a perception that the selection process remained undemocratic encouraged progressive reformers in the early twentieth century to reduce the power of the bosses by allowing ordinary voters to select some convention delegates via intraparty primary election contests.

More than half the states introduced primaries initially, but high costs, low turnout, and tepid support from bosses reduced the postwar number to about sixteen. Candidates continued in the main to be chosen at and by the convention in this second era. While a good primary performance sometimes helped a candidate win the nomination—for example, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy in 1952 and 1960, respectively—conventions regularly nominated presidential candidates who had not entered or had done poorly in the primaries. Indeed, at the Democrats' 1968 Chicago convention, party bosses selected a candidate who had not bothered to enter the primaries: the pro-Vietnam war incumbent vice president Hubert Humphrey. Supporters of the antiestablishment, antiwar Eugene McCarthy were furious and orchestrated a grassroots revolt that led to a convention resolution to widen participation and reduce the influence of the party establishment in candidate choice.

The McGovern–Fraser commission introduced rules and procedures to implement the resolution, resulting in a significant increase in the number of delegates selected by primaries in 1972 onwards. The result has been a progressive transfer of power from the party leadership to the wider electorate. Despite a series of subsequent reforms to reassert the voting power of the party establishment in response to a series of hotly contested and vituperative primary contests and presidential election defeats, it is all but impossible today for a prospective presidential candidate to win the Democratic Party’s nomination without winning a plurality of its primary voters. The job of the modern convention is to ratify rather than choose the presidential nominee. The Republican Party followed suit and democratized its selection procedures in 1976, although to a lesser extent than its rival.²

Although the convention no longer chooses presidential candidates, it performs several important functions and remains a key staging post in the election process. As Buell notes, “The most important function... is to project symbols that revive party loyalty, mobilize party workers, arouse independents, and, hardly least, impress a cynical press corps... [T]hese messages are meant for a national audience rather than the assembled delegates.”³ Conventions allow each party to present to the nation its presidential and vice presidential candidates in an extravagant, exuberant made-for-TV pageant.

Everything about the convention—from the setup of the hall and stage to the order of business to the words of the speakers—is carefully designed for the television cameras; delegates and even important party grandees are merely extras to the nominee’s starring role. The aim is to give the candidate a “bounce” in the polls. History (1964–2004) suggests that the median convention bounce is five percentage points and the mean six points, but the relative size of the bounce and its persistence matter more. George W. Bush’s two-point bounce in 2004 looks meager, but it was a positive triumph compared with John Kerry’s one-point decline in popularity. Sometimes the advantage is ephemeral; other times, real and sustained. George H. W. Bush’s five-point 1992 bounce quickly evaporated, but the successful Democratic convention gave Clinton a sixteen-point bounce and a lead that lasted to election day.⁴

Some commentators have compared conventions to royal coronations, but they lack regal reserve and dignity. They are spectacular but also carefully stage-managed, scripted, and rehearsed. Real debate is nowadays kept to a minimum, and speeches are carefully vetted to ensure they promote the party and presidential nominee in the best possible light, especially after Patrick Buchanan’s prime-time “culture

war” speech frightened wavering and moderate voters and undermined President Bush’s 1992 reelection effort. The first televised conventions, in 1952, gripped America and were reported in their entirety by the major networks, but the modern sanitized versions attract less interest. The absence of division, intrigue, policy debate, and power over candidate selection help explain why TV coverage of and public interest in conventions have declined, yet tens of millions of viewers still tune in to the candidates’ keynote speeches, and the 2008 conventions were some of the most dramatic in recent memory.

The Democratic Party held its 2008 convention in the Pepsi Center, Denver, Colorado, on August 25–28. The party’s early primaries did not lead, as most observers and party insiders had expected, to the anointment of Hillary Clinton as nominee. Barack Obama’s Iowa victory and tight second place to Clinton in New Hampshire set up the closest primary contest in memory. Obama consistently enjoyed a small lead in the delegate count, but Clinton refused to give in. She said she would take the contest all the way to Denver, where she hoped the “superdelegates”—unpledged delegates drawn from the party establishment and constituting about 20 percent of all delegates—would cast decisive votes in her favor. The two campaign teams worked ceaselessly to win over the superdelegates, with some uncommitted ones receiving personal attention from the candidates themselves. Moreover, Clinton’s lawyers sought to reseal Florida’s and Michigan’s delegates, who had been excluded because the states breached party rules by moving forward their primaries.

John McCain secured the Republican nomination in early March, but the indefatigable Clinton conceded the Democratic nomination only on June 7, 2008, after Obama had amassed a mathematically unsailable lead among delegates and declared superdelegates. Democratic strategists worried that McCain was enjoying a free ride while Obama and Clinton were damaging each other and the party’s chances in November. Indeed, the McCain team began to air Clinton’s criticisms of Obama in its campaign ads. Heading into the convention, relations between the two Democratic candidates and campaigns remained strained after the rancorous primary season. Polls suggested that many Clinton supporters would not vote for Obama in the November 4 general election.

The Democrats’ 2004 convention had been criticized for treating the incumbent president, George W. Bush, with kid gloves. Determined not to make the same mistake again, speakers on the first day of the 2008 convention attacked McCain’s judgment and competence and

linked him closely to the unpopular President Bush, while eulogizing the Democratic candidate and his family. Senator Edward Kennedy and Michelle Obama provided the evening's prime-time contributions. A clearly ill Kennedy, suffering from brain cancer, was received emotionally by the convention audience and responded with a poignant and powerful speech in which he sought to portray Obama as the embodiment of his famous family's political legacy. Obama's wife focused less on politics and more on weaving together a narrative around family, patriotism, and the American dream—although she pointedly praised Hillary Clinton in an effort to ease tensions between the two camps before Clinton's keynote speech the following day.

Hillary Clinton, despite real and obvious tensions and despite suggestions in the press that she could wreck Obama's candidacy and kick-start an intraparty civil war, had nothing to gain from extending hostilities. It was necessary to her future presidential ambitions and party legacy to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the Obama ticket and not do anything that could undermine his electoral prospects. She did so in what some observers declared her best-ever speech, urging her supporters and Obama's to put aside their differences and "unite as a single party with a single purpose. We are on the same team, and none of us can sit on the sidelines. This is a fight for the future. . . . No way. No how. No McCain. Barack Obama is my candidate. And he must be our president."⁵

Bill Clinton's own convention speech the next day reiterated his wife's call for unity, set out his support for Obama, and attacked President Bush and McCain ferociously. Both Clintons, wily politicians making calculations about future power, swallowed their pride after a sometimes-bitter primary contest because there was no feasible alternative to supporting the nominee-elect. In an act of great political theatre, New York state terminated the roll call, the official declaration by state delegations of their candidate choice, early when the state senator, Hillary Clinton, proposed "in the spirit of unity" to suspend the procedural rules and nominate Barack Obama by "acclamation." The convention agreed amid scenes of high emotion.

The most eagerly awaited moment and the highlight of the convention was Barack Obama's acceptance speech on August 28. The excitement created by his candidacy and the accompanying clamor to hear him speak—he had regularly attracted tens of thousands of people to primary campaign events—led the Democratic Party to switch the venue from the Pepsi Center to the Invesco Field football stadium. He showed no nerves before a crowd of 80,000 and a television audience

of 38 million. On the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Obama became the first African American to take the presidential nomination of a major party. Yet, keen not to make it an unnecessary issue in the campaign for fear of stirring up prejudice, Obama did not mention race once or King by name.

Instead Obama promoted his patriotism ("Patriotism has no party... We all put our country first"). He attacked McCain's temperament, judgment, and connection to ordinary Americans ("It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it"). He critiqued Bush's "failed policies" and "the broken politics of Washington." He tied McCain to Bush ("John McCain has voted with George Bush ninety percent of the time. Senator McCain likes to talk about judgment, but really, what does it say about your judgment when you think George Bush has been right more than ninety percent of the time?"). And he promised to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while restoring the United States' moral standing in the world. The speech finished with fireworks lighting up the Colorado sky. John McCain even released a TV ad congratulating Senator Obama: "Tomorrow we'll be back at it, but tonight, senator, job well done."

Although some commentators mocked the Grecian stage set and fake Doric columns and argued the speech was too long and hubristic,⁶ most observers were generally complimentary. The speech specifically, and the convention generally, were widely regarded as successes. Surprisingly, then, Obama's convention bounce, estimated by Gallup at four points,⁷ was relatively modest. He went in to the convention tied with McCain on 45 percent support but finished 49–43 ahead.

Whereas the main threat to the success of the Democratic convention was the internal, internecine strife between the key players, the Republican convention at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 1–4 was from the start buffeted by events outside the control of the principals and their spin doctors. The first problem faced by strategists was the looming Hurricane Gustav. President George W. Bush's poll ratings slipped and never recovered after his administration badly bungled the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. McCain desperately did not want to reinforce the perception that Republican leaders were incompetent and, perhaps worse, did not care about people in dire straits. First-day speeches by President Bush and Vice President Cheney were scrapped—a not entirely unpalatable consequence given their unpopularity—and Mrs. Bush and Mrs. McCain instead spoke, focusing on the storm and the relief effort. Lobbyists' cocktail parties were quickly relabeled storm-relief fundraisers.

The second problem was the announcement on the first day of the convention by McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, that her unmarried teenage daughter was pregnant. McCain's selection of the little-known governor of Alaska, announced on August 29, stunned political observers and Republicans alike. As the convention approached, McCain faced increasingly hostile questioning about his pick's lack of experience and knowledge and suggestions that his team had not vetted her properly. But with her commitment to traditional values, especially a hard-line pro-life position, a large tight-knit family, including a newborn baby with Down syndrome, Washington-outsider status, and, not least, telegenic looks and folksy personality, the self-described "average hockey mom" quickly became the new favorite of conservative rank-and-file Republicans. The news of her daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy initially threatened to undermine the Palin narrative and bandwagon, but ultimately it did not. Indeed, it made her look more ordinary, more human, while offering a further opportunity to live the conservative life. Her daughter, it was announced, planned to keep the baby and marry the father: "We're proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby and even prouder to become grandparents. As Bristol faces the responsibilities of adulthood, she knows she has our unconditional love and support."⁸

Palin addressed the conference on September 3, and her speech was widely regarded as a triumph. The *New York Times* said it "electrified" the convention audience by eulogizing her family, reinforcing her outsider status, and tearing into Obama's political inexperience and alleged sneering attitude toward working people: "I might add that in small towns we don't quite know what to make of a candidate who lavishes praise on working people when they are listening, and then talks about how bitterly they cling to their religion and guns when those people aren't listening."⁹

McCain's speech was much less rapturously received. He is a relatively poor orator who never connected viscerally with the Republican faithful, but his job was made more difficult by the necessity of appealing to multiple audiences when the Republican brand was in decline. It was important to stoke up the convention crowd and energize usually loyal Republicans to campaign and vote, but at the same time he had to appeal to wavering independents and moderates, who usually decide close elections. This already difficult task was made more problematic because the GOP was the incumbent party at a time of economic discontent at home and unpopular wars abroad.

McCain settled on a narrative that emphasized his bipartisanship in Washington and promised to reform the broken Washington system (to

appeal to independents) while eulogizing his love of country and military service (to appeal to conservatives), but he had little to say on the issue of greatest concern to voters, the economy, and failed to launch a swingeing attack on his Democratic opponent. He received the obligatory standing ovation, but the convention crowd was left uninspired. The speech was not a failure—in the sense that it did McCain no harm—but the momentum and excitement created by Palin’s address the previous day dissipated in a sea of poorly delivered platitudes and inchoate messages. However, according to Gallup,¹⁰ McCain did enjoy a bounce of six points, and so the Republican candidate ended his convention leading Obama 49–44 points, having trailed 43–49 at its start. But would he be able to sustain it to and through the debates?

The Debates

Once the dust has settled from the national conventions, the next major events on the electoral calendar are the presidential and vice presidential debates. Again, it was not always so. Indeed, the debates—at least in their televised form—are a much more recent innovation than the conventions. The first televised debate took place in 1960, when Kennedy and Nixon clashed. After a sixteen-year hiatus because at least one of the candidates in each election perceived the risk unnecessary or too great, they returned in 1976 and have become a regular part of the political landscape. The potential pitfalls for candidates remain evident. Political commentators still reminisce about Ford’s 1976 debate gaffe that “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe,” Reagan’s “there you go again” riposte to Carter’s attacks in 1980, George H. W. Bush checking his watch in 1992, and, perhaps most famously, Lloyd Bentsen’s zinger in 1988 after incumbent vice president Dan Quayle compared himself to JFK: “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.”

The importance of such gaffes should not be overestimated. Like conventions, presidential debates rarely determine the election outcome. Al Gore’s poor showing—at least relative to expectations—in his 2000 debates with George W. Bush could have been decisive, as could Kennedy’s impressive display against Nixon in 1960, but so could many other factors in such close contests. Nonetheless, like conventions, presidential debates offer high-profile political theatre with the potential to influence election outcomes, especially in a tight race such as 2008, and are therefore taken very seriously by the candidates, who

spend days prepping. Debates are among the very few times during a campaign when the two candidates share a platform. They allow voters to compare and contrast the candidates' knowledge, policy positions, skills, and charisma and allow the candidates to speak directly to the American people for an extended time unmediated by reporters, commentators, and election analysts. Under certain debate formats candidates can also interact extensively, questioning, probing, and most usually attacking each other.

Debates attract large television audiences but have been criticized because they reward telegenic candidates comfortable delivering shallow sound-bites over less physically attractive candidates who insist on engaging with the detail of difficult policy issues. Such criticisms may be well founded. They fit a wider discontent that the American electoral system privileges great or even obdurate campaigners over competent governors, but it is also true that modern American presidents will not prosper unless they can communicate effectively with the public and fellow politicians.¹¹ In this sense the debates offer a good guide to at least some of the skills necessary to be leader of the world's most powerful nation.

Given Obama's noted eloquence and apparently nerveless disposition, demonstrated well in his 2004 and 2008 convention speeches, most Americans expected him to deliver polished debate performances. His oratorical skills are not necessarily suited to such occasions, however.¹² He was rarely poor but also rarely shone in more than twenty Democratic primary debates, often giving long-winded, overly intellectual answers lacking emotion, wit, or character. Fortunately for Obama, McCain is no natural debater either. He too suffers from verbosity, and he appears to find it difficult to keep his temper under control. Nonetheless, the debates offered pitfalls and opportunities for both candidates—to land a killer punch, but more subtly to mobilize one's base and win over wavering voters, especially independents.

The bipartisan, nonprofit Commission on Presidential Debates organized a full complement of debates in 2008, to include three presidential and one vice presidential encounter. The first debate, scheduled for September 26 at the University of Mississippi, almost did not go ahead. The unfolding economic crisis was particularly uncomfortable for McCain. He was unsure of himself on financial questions, and polls showed more Americans trusted Obama to manage the economy effectively. As national security issues faded in importance, McCain's post-convention advantage in Gallup's opinion polls disappeared after he reiterated his belief that the "fundamentals of our economy are strong"

on September 15, the day Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy.¹³ In response, the self-proclaimed “maverick” dramatically and riskily suspended his campaign on September 24, halting his TV ads and withdrawing from the presidential debates until Congress passed a Wall Street bailout package. Then, in a further attempt to show leadership and reclaim control of the agenda, he returned to Washington to lobby fellow members of Congress in favor of Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson’s \$700-billion plan to buy up so-called toxic loans to restore confidence and liquidity to the financial markets. Obama rejected McCain’s proposal to postpone the first debate but also returned to Washington on September 25 for a high-level summit with President Bush, McCain, and congressional and administration leaders to settle on a plan, sell it to a hostile public, and push it through a reluctant Congress.

The summit ended in disarray, divided and with no joint statement of intent. Congress remained unpersuaded by the presence of both presidential candidates, and the Paulson plan continued to languish, largely because a majority of House Republicans opposed it. Several involved in the process blamed McCain for hijacking the negotiations for personal gain, politicizing and destabilizing them in the process, and trying to wriggle out of the televised debate. McCain finally backtracked on his pledge to suspend politics and agreed to attend the debate less than ten hours before its start time. His ploy had failed either to get a plan through Congress or to invigorate his campaign. Indeed, it may have hurt his campaign, as evidenced by polls showing that Obama reversed his deficit and began to lead McCain in the second half of September, entering the debate with a 49–44 advantage.

The First Debate

Chaired by PBS’s Jim Lehrer and ostensibly about national security and foreign policy, the first debate yielded no clear winner. Broadly speaking, Obama was more eloquent and persuasive on economic questions, but McCain had the advantage on security. However, McCain was not afraid to rail against corporate corruption and greed, and Obama appeared reluctant to discuss details of the \$700-billion bailout plan—although he tried to pin the causes of the crisis on Bush’s deregulation policies, which he said McCain supported. Obama spoke forcefully on confronting terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan and what he called the disastrous and unnecessary invasion of Iraq. McCain sought repeatedly to question his opponent’s experience, knowledge,

and qualifications for the top job, calling him “naïve” and claiming repeatedly that the “senator does not understand.” Obama refused to be riled by McCain’s criticisms, remaining calm, serious, and, he hoped, presidential as he spoke to camera, but he struggled to inject passion into his overly technical responses.

The tone of the first debate was less abrasive and vituperative than the wider campaign. Both candidates were ostensibly civil, but there was no warmth and little humor between them. McCain was curt with Obama and rarely looked at or referred to his opponent by name. Neither landed a knock-out punch or even a memorable line in the debate proper or via the postdebate spin. Indeed, each campaign’s spin focused on words the other had not said: “middle-class” in McCain’s case and “victory” in relation to Iraq in Obama’s. Gallup’s next-day polling suggested a narrow debate win for Obama—46 percent thought he did the best job, and 34 percent said McCain, with independents breaking 43–33 in Obama’s favor—but its tracking polls provide no evidence that Obama extended his lead. Nevertheless, the obvious physical differences in color, size, and age presented an interesting contrast and suggested the election offered real choice between two distinct candidates, even if their words did not always do so.

The Vice Presidential Debate

Before the candidates clashed again on October 7, their two running mates met for a town-hall-style debate on October 2 at Washington University. Chaired by PBS’s Gwen Ifill, the vice presidential debate was held just four days after the House of Representatives voted down Paulson’s bailout 228–205, with two-thirds of Republicans in opposition and a majority of Democrats in favor. Democratic spin doctors tried to play up Palin’s town-hall skills, arguing before the contest that she was a “terrific debater” and “skilled speaker.”¹⁴ Such observations looked hyperbolic given the ridicule Palin suffered—especially on *Saturday Night Live*—after her inept interview with CBS’s Katie Couric broadcast in late September, in which she waffled alarmingly about the bailout and wider financial crisis, was unable to name the newspapers she read or Supreme Court rulings she objected to, and promised to get back to Couric with examples of John McCain’s senatorial leadership on financial oversight and regulation. Although the Democrats tried to raise the bar for Palin’s performance, expectations among most media commentators and Americans remained very low. She would have to perform very inadequately indeed for it to be considered a disaster.

Indeed, Palin's apparent flaws, her undeniable appeal to conservative voters, McCain's age, and the magnitude of events preceding the contest made it the most eagerly anticipated debate between vice presidential candidates in American history.

Similar to the first presidential debate, neither vice presidential nominee emerged the obvious winner, with no significant gaffes or memorable attacks. Biden avoided critiquing Palin directly, for fear of appearing condescending and bullying, instead concentrating his fire on McCain and Bush and linking them at every opportunity. Biden reined in his natural verbosity and sounded experienced and knowledgeable. Palin, better informed and more eloquent than in the disastrous Couric interview, did not implode as many had feared or hoped she would. She consistently reinforced her ticket's "maverick," anti-establishment qualities, while promoting Obama and Biden as tax-raising Washington insiders. Perhaps most notable was Palin's relaxed conversational style and body language. She asked Senator Biden whether she could call him Joe, blew a kiss toward the audience, sent a "shout-out" to some third-grade children, winked repeatedly at the camera, played up her hockey-mom, small-town identity, smiled throughout the ninety-minute encounter, and peppered her answers with down-to-earth phrases such as "doggone it," "darn right," "I'll betcha," and "say it ain't so, Joe." Although postdebate polls showed no significant change in support for the two teams and commentators generally thought Palin helped neutralize criticisms that she was an unviable running mate, only the most partisan suggested that she clearly won the debate. She more than met expectations, but again the bar was set extraordinarily low.

The day after the vice presidential debate and two weeks after Paulson's initial request, Congress passed and President Bush signed a version of the \$700-billion subprime bailout plan that the House had rejected earlier in the week. If McCain hoped it would stop the turmoil in the markets and refocus the presidential race on noneconomic issues, he was let down by events. The Dow Jones Industrial Index on the New York Stock Exchange suffered a further large fall, there were no signs of the credit crunch easing, and there was even a rise in unemployment. Democrats blamed the crisis on Republicans' light-touch regulation and Wall Street's greed.

The Second Presidential Debate

McCain tried to jump on the populist bandwagon, blaming the crisis on Wall Street corruption and incompetence, but it appeared to do him

little good. On the eve of the second presidential debate, moderated by NBC's Tom Brokaw on October 7 at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, McCain trailed Obama 51–42 in Gallup's tracking poll,¹⁵ but the debate offered McCain an opportunity to fight back and reestablish momentum as the race entered its last month. Palin suggested that McCain would “take the gloves off” in the second debate, a town-hall meeting format supposedly favored by her running mate, and Obama's aides tried to downplay their charge's chances, claiming they would be “thrilled [if] we can just escape relatively unscathed.”¹⁶ Palin herself relentlessly attacked Obama before the debate, accusing him of “palling around with terrorists,” a reference to his alleged relationship with 1960s radical/terrorist William Ayers. Certainly McCain was more aggressive than in the first debate, but he generally refrained from personal attacks on his rival's character and connections—in particular his relationships with Ayers and former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

In an attempt to win back wavering moderate voters, McCain promoted his own bipartisanship while portraying Obama as liberal, partisan, and inexperienced. He unveiled a new proposal to curtail property repossessions, but otherwise neither candidate offered a compelling analysis of and solution to the economic turmoil beyond platitudes and well-worn partisan critiques. Neither suggested that the federal government should recapitalize banks by taking an equity stake, an idea introduced in the United Kingdom and continental Europe—and which Paulson would adopt on October 10, despite believing such intervention to be “objectionable.” Although neither candidate was comfortable on economic details, Obama was best positioned politically and appeared most able personally to feel Americans' pain at a time of economic and foreign turmoil. He again cited McCain's support for Bush's deregulation of financial markets as a key cause of the meltdown.

There were few fireworks, except during a foreign policy exchange when McCain again pinpointed Obama's inexperience (“In his short career, he does not understand our national security challenges. We don't have time for on-the-job training”). Obama fired back that it was McCain who had made the wrong judgment calls (“It's true, there are some things I don't understand. I don't understand how we ended up invading a country [Iraq] that had nothing to do with 9/11 while Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda are setting up base camps and safe havens to train terrorists to attack us. That was Senator McCain's judgment, and it was the wrong judgment”). The junior senator more than held his ground across a wide range of policy areas and did not look unpresidential or lacking in knowledge, which given his lead in the

polls was all he needed to avoid. Indeed, a next-day Gallup poll found that 56 percent thought Obama did the better job, 23 percent said McCain, and 15 percent called it a draw,¹⁷ although this apparent victory did not translate into an extension of Obama's large single-digit poll lead.

The Third Presidential Debate

With the economy and his poll numbers refusing to rebound after the second debate, many commentators argued that with only three weeks to polling, the third and final debate on October 15, chaired by CBS's Bob Schieffer at Hofstra University, New York, offered McCain one of his last chances to turn the race in his favor. Following their advice, McCain was at his most combative, criticizing his opponent for his relationship with Ayers, for failing to repudiate a supporter who compared McCain to segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace, for opposing a ban on partial-birth abortion, for rejecting legislation that would provide health care to children born after failed abortion operations, for breaking his promise to take public funding and cap his election spending, for spending "more money on negative ads than any political campaign in history," and for being a tax-and-spend liberal who would raise taxes on America's middle class.

On the tax-and-spend point, McCain invoked and obsessed about Joe Wurzelbacher, an Ohio plumber whose taped encounter with Obama a few days earlier on the campaign trail had caused a stir on the Internet and latterly among conservative columnists. Wurzelbacher criticized Obama's tax plans, which he claimed would lead to his paying more tax if he bought a new plumbing business. "What you want to do to Joe the Plumber and millions more like him is have their taxes increased and not be able to realize the American dream of owning their own business." McCain melodramatically accused Obama of "class warfare" for wanting, as Obama had previously said to Joe, to "spread the wealth around"—despite Obama's claim that he would increase taxes only on incomes over \$250,000 and actually cut taxes for 95 percent of Americans.

Despite the strength of the attacks, Obama had ready a full, measured answer to each and remained calm and statesmanlike in response. He constantly tried to turn the focus to the economic crisis and to link McCain to Bush, much to the former's annoyance ("Senator Obama, I am not President Bush. If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago"). Although he was more positive

and energized than in the previous two debates, McCain's famous temper appeared to be bubbling just under the surface. Obama was, in contrast, a study in composure and easily parried McCain's attacks. Moreover, McCain did not seem comfortable with his critique of Obama's character, having suffered ugly attacks by George W. Bush's supporters during the 2000 Republican primaries and promised not to indulge in them himself, and he moved on quickly. According to a *Washington Post*/ABC poll, Obama's strategy to promote a presidential image to offset doubts about his experience and judgment appeared to be working. A majority of Americans now thought he had the requisite experience to be president, more cited him than McCain as the stronger leader, and more thought McCain was a riskier pick than Obama for the top job.¹⁸

Aftermath

The day after the last debate, Obama felt it necessary to warn supporters against overconfidence, referring to his New Hampshire primary loss to Senator Clinton: "I've been in these positions before when we were favored and the press starts getting carried away and we end up getting spanked."¹⁹ McCain, meanwhile, rekindled what he thought was a game-changing invention in the presidential race—"I thought I did pretty well [in the debate, but] the real winner last night was Joe the Plumber. Joe's the man. He won, and small business won across America. . . . The American people are not going to let Senator Obama raise their taxes"²⁰—but the press hysteria surrounding Joe meant McCain lost control of the narrative. The press besieged the Ohio plumber. Stories emerged that he did not own a plumbing license and owed more than \$1,000 in state taxes, and he was also forced to acknowledge that Obama's plan would result in a personal tax reduction given his current income.

Next-day polling by Gallup showed that although McCain thought he had done the better job, the American people did not. Only 30 percent gave him the third debate, and 56 percent said Obama won it. Moreover, a net 22 percent felt more favorable toward Obama, and McCain's overall favorability rating fell by eight points.²¹ Obama had good reason to caution against postdebate hubris, however. His apparent triumph in the third debate, as in the previous two, did not engender a significant fillip in the opinion polls. Gallup's tracking poll estimated his lead on October 17 at eight points among registered voters, roughly where it had been all month, but among likely voters the margin was

only four or two points, depending on the measure. Moreover, over many years Gallup's postdebate polling had regularly awarded victory to Democratic candidates whereas voters in November frequently favored Republicans.

Yet, over the course of the debates, it was clear that the political environment was against McCain, in part because of continuing problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, but largely because of the economic crisis. Republicans in 2008, as in 1932, did not have the economic toolkit and the political language to convince voters that they had the solution to the deepening crisis. McCain's poll ratings declined steadily through September and October, in the main because of economic factors outside the control of his campaign. The debates offered him three opportunities to get back in the game, but he failed to deliver a killer punch or even a memorable line. He made Joe the Plumber famous, but Joe, a middle-class everyman, could not restore McCain's fortunes. In contrast, Obama did not need to knock McCain out. The debates instead offered the opportunity to sideline questions over his experience and judgment, an opportunity he took almost effortlessly. He lived up to his nickname, "No Drama Obama," and delivered steady, composed, presidential performances.

Notes

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