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A candidate fluent in poetry and prose

Obama: the Democrats in person

Who Barack Obama is and what he represents is just as important in the US presidential nomination campaign as what he says or what he proposes by way of policy. He has come to embody everything the Democratic party has stood for and pursued for 50 years.

By **John Gerring and Joshua Yesnowitz**

Barack Obama's candidacy is a movement as much as it is a campaign, with boisterous rallies, many volunteers and over a million small donors. This movement has mobilised many new voters into the democratic process, particularly the young and independents (citizens unaffiliated with either major party). As a result of this enthusiasm, as well as the closeness of the race, turnout in Democratic primaries and caucuses across the nation has reached historic highs (1).

And yet there are wide differences of opinion over what the Obama candidacy represents. To supporters, he is a fundamentally new force in US politics, who rises above partisanship and tells people to "turn the page" on the political gridlock inside Washington's Beltway. To opponents within the Democratic party (those supporting the candidacy of rival senator Hillary Clinton), he is nothing but bombast, coupled with youth and inexperience. And to Republican partisans, he is beguiling but not mysterious: an old-fashioned tax-and-spend liberal, scarcely different from those who have come before.

Each of these perspectives has an element of truth. The newness of this man, his freshness and vitality have provided plenty of

material for the commentariat. With a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas, Barack Obama was raised in Hawaii and in Indonesia, where his mother had moved to pursue her research for a doctoral degree in anthropology. (She eventually re-married, providing Barack with an Indonesian stepfather.) He attended college in California (Occidental) and New York (Columbia), then moved to the south side of Chicago to serve as a community organiser before receiving his law degree in Massachusetts (Harvard). Barack Hussein Obama is a useful screen on which the world has projected many themes.

Messenger not architect

He is a messenger but not an architect of the modern Democratic party. Novelty aside, Obama's candidacy is defined by many now-traditional Democratic themes. From the end of the 19th to the mid-20th century, the party was defined by its opposition to a perceived concentration of power and money in American society. Democratic candidates for president – including William Jennings Bryan (candidate in 1896, 1900, 1908), Woodrow Wilson (1912, 1916), Franklin Roosevelt (1932, 1936, 1940 and 1944) and Harry Truman (1948) – campaigned for the “people” and against the “interests”. They had a plebiscite-based vision of political power in which the common people were enjoined to rule directly (or as directly as possible), and “private” conclaves of power were assumed to be corrupt and self-interested. They inveighed against the concentrated power of capitalists, called “trusts” or “big business”. Against the privileges enjoyed by elites, Democrats championed the rights of the common man – assumed to be white and of European origin. This was the Populist era of Democratic party ideology (2).

After the second world war and beginning with the campaigns of Adlai Stevenson (1952, 1956), and continuing with those of John Kennedy (1960), Lyndon Johnson (1964) and Hubert Humphrey (1968), the vitriol of the Populist era diminished. Social class antagonism was de-emphasised, and in its place came a different self-image and policy objectives. Post-war Democrats defended the social reforms of the Progressive and New Deal eras, and often sought to extend the scope of these policies (especially social security). But in their public appeals, they avoided all connotations of class warfare and instead adopted an ideology of universalism embracing all races, creeds, and classes.

One objective of this rhetorical strategy was a desire to escape from the perceived dangers of a creeping communism (this was the height of the cold war) and an increasingly unpopular labour movement. Post-war Democrats rarely issued forthright calls for government to regulate the private sector, and never attacked big business. Yet the adoption of a universalistic, all-together-now ideology was not simply a rhetorical tool by which to avoid

accusations of socialism and un-Americanism; it also articulated a new policy objective for the Democratic party.

Beginning in 1948 with the adoption of the first civil rights ideas, Democrats came to support the active engagement of government in establishing rights for women and minorities. At first, the meaning of minority was restricted to African-Americans. Later, as the precedent of civil rights for blacks became established, the party also embraced women's rights, Hispanic rights, gay rights and many other, smaller ethnic- and issue-based constituencies. The philosophy of rights was extended. It might be argued that the party shifted, during the 20th century, from an ideology of majority rule to an ideology of minority rights.

Poised to walk the walk

One step on this march toward fraternal and sororal unity remained. The party's standard-bearers for the presidency had so far been white and male. Women and minorities were encouraged to vote for Democrats, but they were not granted the top job (though several tried, including Geraldine Ferraro and Jesse Jackson). Now, after talking the talk of inclusion for half a century, the party is poised to walk the walk. This year, whichever is chosen, Barack or Hillary will embody the quest of the modern Democratic Party in his or her lifestory.

The only other serious contender with a white face and a Y chromosome – John Edwards – suspended his campaign after the first spate of primaries, having won not a single state. He ran a populist campaign focused on class disparities and income inequality, a strategy that failed to gain traction.

Of the remaining candidates, one has pushed the universalist theme much more strongly than the other. While Hillary Clinton portrays herself as a policy wonk, a protagonist of universal health care, and co-president of the Clinton administration (1993-2001), Obama stands as the culmination of Democratic inclusion. It is not just his uplifting lifestory, but his soaring rhetoric that captures the party's mood in this post-industrial era.

First introduced to a nationwide audience in July 2004 when he addressed the Democratic National Convention, the senator from Illinois captivated the delegates with his non-ideological call for community and civic faith. As he said in his now-famous speech:

"There's not a liberal America and a conservative America – there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. We worship an awesome God in the Blue [Democratic] States, and we don't like

federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red [Republican] States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and have gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and patriots who supported it. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.”

All can prosper

At campaign events, which observers compare to religious revival meetings, Obama consistently reminds his supporters that all Americans, regardless of race, class or gender, can prosper. His own name, he tells us, is a sign of distinctly American possibilities: “[My parents gave] me an African name, Barack, or blessed, believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren’t rich, because in a generous America you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential.”

Obama promotes his candidacy as post-partisan and post-racial, aiming to build an all-inclusive consensus for change. This has allowed supporters to define what Obama represents to them, irrespective of his actual policy positions. It is not so much that Obama avoids taking positions – he did so on Iraq (3) – but rather that his supporters overlook them, in preference for his overall gestalt.

The confluence of form and content in his message is nowhere more apparent than in his standard stump speech. His trademark slogan “Yes, We Can!” embodies universalist themes of inclusion and tolerance in a call-and-response style much like the participatory traditions in the African-American church. It is no surprise that the Democratic masses have thronged to this harbinger of change. He exemplifies what the party has been striving for over the past half-century. He is the apotheosis of Democratic universalism.

During the campaign Obama has been repeatedly attacked, first by Clinton and now by Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee, for being “merely rhetorical” and “eloquent but empty” – insubstantial, lacking weight. There is concern that his knowledge of policy is thin and that he has no clear agenda.

A rhetorical art

While this expresses a legitimate concern, we must not forget that the business of politics is about words, the stronger, more resonant language that qualifies as poetry in today’s political lexicon (another epithet thrown at Obama). Words, and the

ability to deliver them, are the craft of the profession, for politics is a rhetorical art. People listened to Ronald Reagan, and they liked what they heard. The same could not be said for George W Bush or his father.

The element that distinguished Bill Clinton from almost every other recent Democratic presidential aspirant (including his spouse) was his mastery of the art of communication. Without it, a candidate can get little accomplished. The common wisdom (echoed by the Clinton campaign) that a nominee campaigns in poetry but governs in prose, ignores the truth that in this age of the permanent campaign, a politician must command both poetry and prose, and all the time. It is no accident that the American leaders deemed great are those whose words we remember.

Abraham Lincoln was accused by opponents of hiding his true agenda behind a fog of fine-sounding – but substantively ambiguous – words. During his 1860 campaign for the presidency, Lincoln was pressed repeatedly to take a clear stand on the question of abolition. The banner under which Lincoln chose to conduct his campaign was that of nationalism: Lincoln depicted himself as saviour of the Union, not as the protector of black men and women. He professed abhorrence of slavery, but he always made it clear that this was a personal opinion, not a partisan one, and would have few policy ramifications should he be elected.

In this sense, his performance may be counted among the most outstanding instances of electoral prevarication in the annals of politics. And yet, Americans, black and white, would probably defend it today: it was, by all accounts, the only strategy that could secure him the Republican nomination, and, with a bit of luck, the presidency.

If the Democrats choose Obama to carry their standard in November, his special political sensitivity will have little to do with race. Instead, what is likely to be controversial is his presumed liberalism. His voting record (in Illinois and in the US Senate) as well as his political allies indicate that he is from the left wing of the party, further to the left than most recent Democratic nominees. Obama's modernity has nothing in common with that of Bill Clinton when he was elected in 1992 on a centre-right programme. If he becomes the nominee Obama may be classified by historians as the most left-leaning Democrat since George McGovern in 1972. Will Obama choose to run in the general election as a professed liberal or portray himself as above the partisan fray?

- ► See also
- 'Yes, We Can!'

Original text in English

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(1) For demographic group and voter turnout data, updated throughout the primary calendar, see the United States Election Project at <http://elections.gmu.edu/>

(2) This historical sketch draws on John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

(3) On 2 October 2002, when the majority of Americans were supporting the policies of Bush, Obama took part in an anti-war demonstration where he made an important speech.

