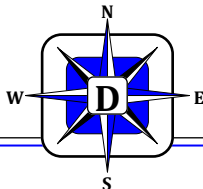




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The Audacity of Hoping Halley's Comet Will Return in 2010

Why Barack Obama's 2008 Victory in North Carolina Will Not Drive This Year's Races

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John Davis Political Report is a weekly essay about the political trends impacting North Carolina politics. A Premium Subscription through the 2010 elections is only \$500. **Make checks payable to John Davis Consulting, EIN 26-3064837, and mail to P.O. Box 30714, Raleigh, NC 27622.** Davis has followed NC politics for 24 years, serving as President of NCFREE, a political research group, where he was Editor of the *Almanac of North Carolina Politics*. Davis specializes in analyzing political trends, candidates and campaigns.

Timing with Regards to Politics, Rain Dances and Comets

Timing has a lot to do with the outcome of political races, just like timing has a lot to do with the outcome of a rain dance ... or the return of a comet.

President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for the White House reminds me of Halley's Comet: a spectacular event, brilliant and inspiring, that comes along once every 76 years. Using his skills honed as an inner city community organizer in Chicago, he won the race with 7 million more popular votes than any candidate in the history of presidential politics, raising a staggering \$782 million, and employing 6,000 staffers who managed an all-volunteer army of 13 million.

David Plouffe, President Obama's campaign manager, revealed the campaign secrets in his book *The Audacity to Win*, published last month. He proudly tells the story of how their rag tag militia defeated the dream teams of both the Democratic and Republican parties with a once-in-a-lifetime-candidate, a single powerful message, and a web site used to organize and communicate with staff and volunteers ... and raise money like it had never been raised before.

In September 2008 alone, the Obama campaign raised \$150 million; \$100 million of that had been raised online as a result of 10 fund-raising e-mails. "There were times when we were raising \$250,000, \$300,000, even \$500,000 an hour."¹ Why did that matter here in North Carolina? "Every additional dime was being funneled into battleground states," said Plouffe.

Halley's Comet: a spectacular event, brilliant and inspiring, returns in 2061. That's about when we will likely see another candidacy like that of Barack Obama in 2008. As to 2010, read on.

¹ *The Audacity to Win*, by David Plouffe, Campaign Manager for Obama for America, page 327.

Throwing Long

Obama insisted on three things at the outset of his campaign. One was that he alone would establish the message and that it would not be negotiable; two, that his campaign would win with a grassroots organization targeting unconventional voters; three, that they would have the courage to take risks, a campaign quality that David Plouffe describes as “throwing long.”

The message from day one was change. "Change versus a broken status quo; people versus the special interests; a politics that would lift people and the country up; and a president who would not forget the middle-class."² The campaign strategy from day one was to gain the advantage over Hillary Clinton and her high-roller backed campaign of *Manifest Destiny* with a grassroots ground game funded by small contributors. It worked in Iowa; the first major electoral event of the presidential nominating process. Clinton snubbed Iowa while the Obama staff and volunteers pulled off an upset victory by getting their supporters to leave their homes on a frigid, February day and go to a caucus meeting to cast a vote for Obama.

Throughout the primary, the Obama campaign defied conventional wisdom by targeting those least likely to vote like younger white voters, independents, newly registered African-American voters, and African-American voters who had voted sporadically in the past. They invested heavily in early turnout of these non-habitual voters with radio ads and Internet ads pushing early voting; they sent e-mail and text messages to tens of thousands of North Carolinians urging early voting, called tens of thousands more and sent volunteers door-to-door to urge early voting.

Traces of the Strategic Design

On May 6, 2008, Primary Election Day exit polling here in North Carolina was so conclusive that the moment the polls closed the national networks declared Obama the winner over Clinton. Plouffe recalls the 14-point blowout in his book this way: “As the returns came in, we could see the traces of our strategy’s design: by registering over 100,000 new voters, producing strong turnout among African-Americans and young voters, and winning college-educated whites thanks to our stand against the gas tax, we made ourselves unbeatable in North Carolina.”³

The unconventional strategy of targeting atypical voters in unlikely places like North Carolina continued throughout the fall. Obama knew he could not defeat a Republican presidential nominee in the Old North State with TV ads, no matter how much money he spent. His only hope was a massive ground game, registering and turning out non-traditional voters.

When the dust settled and the numbers were tallied in North Carolina following the November elections, 967,804 new voters had been registered during the year, with nearly 8 in 10 registering either as Democrats or Unaffiliated, pushing our state to over 6 million registered voters for the first time ever. New African-American voters totaled over 304,708. New voters in the 18 to 24 year-old age group totaled 317,584.

² *The Audacity to Win*, page 32.

³ *The Audacity to Win*, page 229.

The Obama campaign had 47 headquarters in our state, with over 400 paid staff in the twenty-something age group. These junior operatives were responsible for record early voting totaling 2.6 million (only 984,000 voted early in 2004), more voters than on Election Day. Seven out of 10 of the early voters were either Democrats (51%) or Unaffiliated (19%). African Americans comprised 28% of early voters, as compared to only 19% of the 2004 general election early vote.

Obama won North Carolina by defying conventional wisdom, by using a non-negotiable message of change and a grassroots organization. He won because he was willing to throw long.

The Honeymoon is Over; and You are Not Who I Married!

It has been said that marriage is when *two become one*, and then they spend the rest of their lives arguing about *which one*. The biggest difference between the magical Obama “marriage” of 2008 and the post-honeymoon relationship of 2010 is that now, after a year’s worth of leadership, his supporters are beginning to doubt his commitment to promises made at the altar.

The clearest example of a weakening Obama base can be seen in the low turnout of young adults in Virginia and New Jersey last year despite numerous pleas from the president during personal visits. Only 8% of the 18 to 24 year old voters turned out in New Jersey (17% in 2008), with only 10% turning out in Virginia (21% in 2008). Republicans won both governors’ races.

Obama won in 2008 in great part because of young and enthusiastic, anti-war idealists who worked tirelessly registering and turning out other young, enthusiastic, anti-war idealists. When those same voters opened their laptops yesterday to read the news, they were probably astounded by an AP story titled, *Obama wants record \$708 billion for wars next year*.⁴ The article notes that the record amount will be used in Iraq and to expand the unpopular war in Afghanistan, and points out that the request will be a difficult sell to Democratic Party leaders in the Congress. Those young anti-war Obama idealists are less likely to retool for other Democrats in 2010.

The tables are now turned. They are now Obama’s wars; it’s now Obama’s economy. He gets the credit for the good and the bad, and it’s beginning to show in the national polls:

According to the Gallop polling organization January 13, 2010:⁵

- Obama’s job approval is 50%, down from a first-year high of 69%
- Only 40% of Americans approve of Obama’s handling of the economy (lowest ever)
- Only 37% of Americans approve of Obama’s handling of health care reform (lowest ever)
- Looking only at the all-important Independent voters, only 31% approve of Obama’s handling of the economy and of health care reform
- Conservatives outnumber both moderates and liberals for the first time since 2004
- Fewer than half of Americans call themselves Democrats (a first since 2005)

President Barack Obama’s campaign for the White House was a spectacular event, like Halley’s Comet, brilliant and inspiring, a game-changer in many North Carolina races in 2008. But as to whether it will drive our 2010 elections ... ummmmm, well, Halley’s Comet returns in 2061.

⁴ AP, January 13, 2010, by Anne Gearan and Anne Flaherty

⁵ Gallup, January 13, 2010. See: www.gallup.com