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Factors Behind Barack Obama's Unprecedented Victory in 2008 Presidential Elections

عوامل النجاح غير المسبوق لأوباما في الانتخابات الرئاسية في 2008

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Abstract

In the history of the United States, Barack Obama is the first person of a "different" skin color to hold the office of the president. The "dream" of Martin Luther King seemed to come true. That would seem peculiar and strange in a country whose previous presidents were all white. The presidential elections of 2008 drew the attention of many observers and commentators who highlighted the different factors which led Obama to victory. Technology and social media changed the political scene in the United States considerably. Candidates to presidential or local elections use web applications such as Facebook or/and Twitter to communicate with citizens and gain their political supports. Obama, the 44th President of the United States, was the first candidate to elections who made an extensive use of websites, e-mails, mobile applications, and Facebook and Twitter. His use of social media played a pivotal role in winning him the 2008 elections. The present research examines how technology and social media played an influential role in enhancing political activities in the United States, and how Obama pioneered this sphere. Besides, the paper shed light on many other important factors that contributed to Obama's unprecedented victory in the presidential elections 2008.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

في تاريخ الولايات المتحدة ، كان باراك أوباما أول شخص من لون بشرة «مختلف» يتولى منصب الرئيس. بدا أن «حلم» مارتن لوتر كينج قد تحقق. قد يبدو هذا غريباً في بلد كان جميع رؤسائه السابقين من البيض. لفتت الانتخابات الرئاسية لعام 2008 انتباه العديد من المراقبين الذين سلطوا الضوء على العوامل المختلفة التي أدت إلى فوز أوباما غيرت التكنولوجيا ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي المشهد السياسي في الولايات المتحدة إلى حد كبير. يستخدم المرشحون للانتخابات الرئاسية أو المحلية تطبيقات الويب مثل Facebook و / و Twitter للتواصل مع المواطنين والحصول على دعمهم السياسي. كان باراك إتش أوباما ، الرئيس الرابع والأربعون للولايات المتحدة، أول مرشح للانتخابات استخدم بشكل مكثف مواقع الويب والبريد الإلكتروني وتطبيقات الهاتف المحمول وفيسبوك وتويتر. لعب استخدامه لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي دوراً محورياً في فوزه في الانتخابات الرئاسية لعام 2008. يفحص البحث الحالي كيف لعبت التكنولوجيا ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي دوراً مؤثراً في تعزيز الأنشطة السياسية في الولايات المتحدة، وكيف كان أوباما رائداً في هذا المجال.

الركود الاقتصادي
أوباما
وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي
الانتخابات الرئاسية
الأمريكية.

1. Introduction

As a stepping stone to the presidential elections of 2008, the former Democratic candidate John Kerry chose Barack Hussein Obama as the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention. The selection of Barack Obama as a candidate was very carefully undertaken. The presidential election of 2008 was so peculiar since an Afro-American might become a president for the first time in the history of the United States. Unlike Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) who was the first Afro-American to have his name entered in nomination, Obama's candidacy was promising. What mattered him more was how to convince white Americans to vote for him, as he knew that most of Afro-American electors would vote for him. Factors like his personality, the use of technology, and issues as race, religion, and economy helped Obama become the 44th President of the United States.

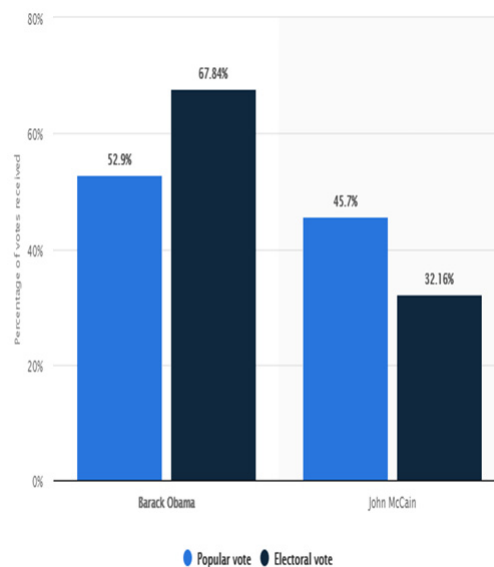
2. Obama's Traits and Personality

The American presidential elections of 2008 witnessed an unprecedented victory for the candidate of the Democratic Party Barack H. Obama. Figure 1 shows that Obama gained 53 percent of the popular vote that gave him 68 percent of the electoral votes; while his rival McCain could only gain 32 of the electoral vote share.

Videos and speeches released via social networks provided Obama's followers with an understanding of the candidate's personality. Among Obama's important personal, psychological, and political traits was fairness. His values and ideals, which mirrored his mother's, were embodied in his fairness and moral leadership to overcome social injustice. A sense of social and economic justice was encapsulated in the health care legislation.

Figure 1

Distribution of Votes in the 2008 US Presidential Election



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1056689/distribution-votes-2008-us-presidential-election/>

The commentator David Leonhardt noted:

The bill that President Obama signed on Tuesday is the federal government's biggest attack on economic inequality since inequality began rising more than three decades ago . . . This fact helps explain why Mr. Obama was willing to spend so much political capital on the issue, even though it did not appear to be his top priority as a presidential candidate. Beyond the health reform's effect on the medical system, it is the centerpiece of his deliberate effort to end what historians have called the age of Reagan. (Qtd in Renshen 2011)

Obama wrote that among the ideals and the values that his mother stressed was fairness. In Indonesia, she spent her time working for change and fairness. Her son emulated her strategy to become a community organizer. He was also influenced by his father who aimed for a political position where he could preach for fairness. Although Obama held conflicted feelings about his parents, he could by no means ignore the role his mother, in particular, played in his life. He wrote: "I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I would have written a different book - less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life ... I know that she was the kindest, most

generous spirit I have ever known, and what is best in me I owe to her” (Qtd in Renshen 2011)

So, fairness and justice were central ideals that anchored his ambition to fight for “economic fairness”. It seems clear that Obama intended to become “a moral leader” just like the heroes he admired most. To reach such an end, Obama believed that more and more individuals had to join the moral fight. He believed in the collective salvation which is a cornerstone in the politics of transformation.

Renshon (2011) stated that Obama’s great love for his country aspired him to redeem and transform it. His great goal was to transform the country to reach its national redemption through fairness. On his hundredth day in office at a meeting, he addressed the American people by saying: “So today on my 100th day in office, I’ve come to report to you, the American people, that we have begun to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off, and we have begun the work of remaking America. We’re working to remake America”(Qtd in Renshon 2011). He was enamored with change. Obama stated that he wanted to scramble and mingle the frameworks endeavored by his heroes like Abraham Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King.

His first two years in office and his fierce fight against the dire economic conditions proved that he succeeded to redeem his country. He established himself to be a “great president”. He did not only change some particular issues, but sought to transform the culture. In 2011, Renshen stated that it was: “clear that Obama’s view of transformation involves the remaking of America’s basic culture in the service of his view of presidential greatness” (p1040).

Obama’s childhood, which provided him with the opportunity to see extreme disparities of wealth and poverty, helped him be aware of ‘fundamental unfairness’. It is on this basis that the President wanted to help this country ‘to live up to its ideals as a place of opportunity and fairness’; this was one of his presidential quests.

During the first two years of his presidency, the President demonstrated his willingness to pursue fairness through his ambitions to truly redeem the

country from its malaise. Renshen (2011) concluded that,

Obama emerges as a confirming case for the importance of ambition, conviction, and relatedness in assessing the impact of a president’s core psychology on his leadership choices and political consequences. However, it is here that Obama differs with his immediate predecessors. Neither Bill Clinton nor George W. Bush aspired to be transformative leaders. Neither aspired to become the moral center of the American policy universe, and certainly neither began their quest for presidency with the assumption that they were running for office to redeem the country and their family legacies. These latter aspects of Obama presidency are unique. (p 1054)

In addition, Obama’s pragmatism helped him undertake important strategies to solve the nation’s problems. Of his pragmatism, Obama said;

Well, I think what it means is that I don’t approach problems by asking myself, is this a conservative - is there a conservative approach to this or a liberal approach to this, is there a Democratic or Republican approach to this. I come at it and say, what’s the way to solve the problem, what’s the way to achieve an outcome where the American people have jobs or their health care quality has improved or our schools are producing well-educated workforce of the 21st century. And I am willing to tinker and borrow and steal ideas from just about anybody if I think they might work. (Qtd in Rensshen)

However, he remains a mystery to many people even to his supporters and some political analysts who covered his presidential campaign. They think his personality is elusive and contradictory. While some people judged the President negatively because of his race, Winter (2011) deemed highly important and effective to undertake a systematic analysis of his personality. Winter employed a fourfold conception of personality. He focused on Obama’s behavior, his principles and values, and long-term goals.

With regard to his social class, Obama could be placed along the borders of lower-middle-class and working class. However, the educational institutions he attended helped him co-opt into the ruling class.

As a Black man, Obama succeeded to found a family at a time when such ‘traditional’ institutions were in a flux. His family provided him with an ultimate source that would shape the rest of his personality.

Obama is mostly referred to by biographers and journalists as ‘Mr. Calm’; the nickname ‘No Drama Obama’ attributed to him during the presidential campaign refers to his legendary calmness and emotional stability. Actually, his emotional stability is an important factor to achieve his calmness. His social context also played an important role in shaping his calmness. Domains of the White world like universities, high schools, and politics helped the Black man to control his anger. This was to avoid giving a negative image about Black Americans.

Other social contexts are relevant to Obama’s calmness. Hawaii, where he spent his childhood and adolescence, provided an atmosphere of great tolerance and calmness. Describing it, Obama said: “Hawaii brings together people from all walks of life.....The truth is that there is more cooperation and people getting together despite different religions or different ethnicities than just about any place else in the country. And that spirit, that aloha spirit is something I carry with me” (Qtd in Winter 2011).

In addition to Hawaii, Obama attributed his calmness to Indonesia where he spent four years. Indonesia, where he learnt to be patient, calm, and a good listener, fostered another aspect of calmness. People around him also contributed to his calmness.

His mother afforded ‘a sense of unconditional love’ which sustained him entirely. In addition, his grandparents, with whom Obama spent eight years, had a great role in raising his calmness and confidence.

Other than his calmness, Obama displays great openness to the views of others. This can explain why his team was a ‘team of rivals’. Winter (2011) noted

Obama displayed this style [openness] well before running for president, as a law student, and later as a law school faculty member. This evidence points clearly to his being high in openness to experience. He is careful and plans ahead. This combination of careful planning and rigorous debate suggests a high

level of conscientiousness, which is also consistent with the emphasis on Obama’s strong organizational skills. (p1064)

As for the cognitive aspects of his personality, analysts measured Obama’s cognitive aspects of his personality through his speeches, interviews, and writings. According to Walker (2011), Obama is pessimistic. Such a pattern might lead to passive withdrawal. However, Obama, the “conciliator”, emphasized the cooperation based on appeals and rewards, rather than on threats.

This emphasized Winter’s view on Obama’s pragmatism. Winter noted that

As president, Obama has indeed been pragmatic and inclusive, compromising when necessary while continuing to articulate a vision of “working hard and working together” instead of “drawing lines in the sand”. In fact, during the second year of his presidency, many of Obama’s most loyal supporters became upset at his willingness to compromise and adjust his policies in the course of legislative debate, because they felt that the Republican opposition was exploiting Obama’s “inclusive” operational code merely in order to block his programs. (pp 1066)

Such characteristics could mitigate the inevitable frustrations of politics. They do all seem to come together in his decisions.

3. Extensive Use of Technology to Win Elections

In addition to his team’s efforts, Ford et al. (2009) attributed the victory of Obama to his skilled and effective use of technology. His campaign team was the first to make use of the second generation of Web technology such as blogging, micro blogging, video broadcasting sites, online document storage, public file sharing, and social networking sites. The team spread news, images, and videos to millions of users and viewers to achieve full communication and voter mobilization.

Obama managed to obtain about 2 million supporters on Facebook, and 115,000 followers on Twitter. Obama benefited from the use of such technological innovations in several ways. First, journalists who covered the 2008 presidential elections noticed that

Obama's extensive use of technology helped him position himself as the 'technology president' unlike his rival John McCain. The latter confessed that he was a 'computer illiterate'. Second, Obama's strategists relied on database management to 'identify, monitor, and communicate with voters.' They uploaded nearly 2,000 videos on YouTube as they knew that many American voters watched political advertisements on the site.

Furthermore, the campaign's team could reach young voters through Facebook. Surveys conducted by political scientists revealed that in the course of the campaign, Obama had more than 800,000 Facebook friends, as compared to 120,000 for John McCain (Ford et al. 2009). Scott Goodstein, who organized the mobile communication aspect of the campaign, deemed it highly important to use mobile phones to mobilize voters as he knew that about 84% of the American population used mobiles. Obama did not only use text messages to remind voters of their right to vote, but also offered ringtone collage of his speeches.

Once in office, the President used technology to move from campaigning to governing. He nominated Aneesh Chopra as the new chief technology officer to restructure the White House website. They created the Web site (<http://www.change.gov>) to provide a list of available jobs in the new administration. They made it easy to find, sort, download, and manipulate information.

Burke (2009), in writing about Obama's pre-election efforts, came to the conclusion that,

While not perfect, the Obama transition to office did reasonably well in laying the groundwork for his presidency. The pre-election effort is especially notable. It not only put in place the necessary steps for organizing the post-election transition effectively, but also it undertook a robust effort to plan for his presidency. Both before and after Election Day, discipline prevailed; the infighting and media leaks that had plagued earlier transitions were absent. The post-election transition moved quickly in appointing and organizing the White House...By April, the administration appeared to have made up for lost

time. (p 601)

In addition to these historic achievements, Obama opened the doors to other minority candidates to use Web technologies in their electoral campaigns. Data revealed that Americans of color were more likely to use internet than White Americans. Many electors subscribed and signed to receive update online political news. However, both Whites and African Americans created their online political contents. Even Republican members caught up. They started twittering and using other Web sites to mobilize voters.

Joe Trippi, a campaign manager, argued that: "the Obama victory ensures that future elections will be won not because the candidate was anointed by a power party, but because he or she was best at using a Web and new media strategy to rally the masses"(Qtd in Ford et al.) Ford (2009) concluded that: "And now, due to the retrospective technological changes, that outsider [Obama] is inside the White House." (p 473)

4. Race, Religion, and Economy

The different skin color was a curse for Afro-Americans, to win the presidency Barack Obama had to overcome obstacles of race, religion, and the economic recession.

4.1 Race

To run for presidency, in a land where Black people were considered as merchandise sold at the auction block, Obama had to undergo a very long struggle. To embarrass his opponents, the candidate had to show his birth certificate to prove that he was an American; that he was not a foreigner. Winter (2011) stated:

Obama's racial background is actually complex; as a child of a White woman and a Black father, he is technically of a mixed race; moreover, his father was an African from Kenya, imbued with the legacy of British colonialism rather than American slavery and discrimination. In the American context, however, these complexities are overlooked, and people with any African ancestry are usually coded and treated as "African American" or "Black".

It is important to mention that slavery is as old as the country itself. Slavery started in 1619; and led

the country to a bloody civil war that lasted for five years. Slavers could finally be freed and declared citizens after the adoption of the Reconstruction Era Amendments to the Federal Constitution. Yet, freedom and citizenship did never imply that black Americans were automatically integrated within the American society.

Obama's connection to the Black community helped him gain more Black votes, yet he was also dependent on the votes and financial supports of wealthy White liberals. Obama did strike a precarious balance between Blacks and Whites. His hopeful promise of changing social and economic contexts along with his race-neutral campaign contributed to his victory

Although Obama promised change for all Americans, he relied more on African Americans' consciousness to mobilize Black voters. He endeavored to increasing Black registration, voting, and mobilization. African Americans' registration was the highest since 1984. This strategy proved effective to galvanize his campaign and afford him important victories in Southern states with high African American populations. In addition, data revealed that African Americans' contribution to the campaign through time or money reached unprecedented levels. This support remained constant and consistent during his first eight months in office.

The country, which has been for centuries weakened by racial divisiveness, has considered Obama as the only one person who would represent the interests of all segments of society. He could build a coalition_ rather a fragile one_ of White voters through pioneering a race-neutral campaign. Obama maximized his appeal to White voters. He could compromise groups of different political partnerships. Henceforth, African Americans enjoyed more possibilities of participating in the political scene and privileges which have been for a long time closed to Black candidates. They moved from protest to politics. Obama's victory paved the way for generations of African American politicians. He even provided them with the appropriate strategic approaches to reach victory. They will have to appeal and mobilize multiracial constituencies.

Obama, a member of an American social construct

named "a minority", expressed a strong appeal to minority groups which contributed to his political party's electoral coalition. Groups like African Americans, Hispanics, blue-collar workers, women and young people all demonstrated their enthusiasm for him at the polls.

4.2 Religion

Thomas Jefferson did his best to establish freedom of religion in the American nation. Jefferson designed the Bill of Establishing Religious Freedom that was passed by the Virginia Assembly. In 1787, Jefferson endeavored to insert the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause within the First Amendment to the Federal Constitution. However, freedom of religion and freedom from religion were not unchallenged.

Freedom of religion had never been a settled issue. The aforesaid free exercise clauses were denied by the Supreme Court while ruling cases like *Minnerville v. Gobitis* (1944), *Gillette v. United States* (1971), and *O'Lone v. Chabbazz* (1987) which denied Islamic prisoners the right to attend religious services and prayers. Holding different religious beliefs did not go unnoticed in the country of freedom of religion.

To declare he was Moslem, Obama would serve best his fellow candidate to the presidency. Obama's presidential campaign advisors urged him to declare he was a Christian. Had his opponents convinced voters that Obama was Moslem, the gate to presidency would have been easily closed to him.

During his campaign, Obama talked about attending a Roman Catholic school and being baptized at Trinity Church of Christ to defeat his opponents' attacks. In addition, Obama claimed that he took an oath as U.S. Senator on his family Bible. Such information could thrust confidence on voters (A. Larbi Youcef 63)

4.3 Economy

On the eve of the presidential election, the picture of economy was "darker than dark". The 2008 Comparative Campaign Analysis Project made a nation-wide survey about the way Americans assessed the economy before the election. About 94% of the surveyed voters found that economy was performing worse. (See table below) It is clear that voters were

strongly impressed by the dire economic conditions.

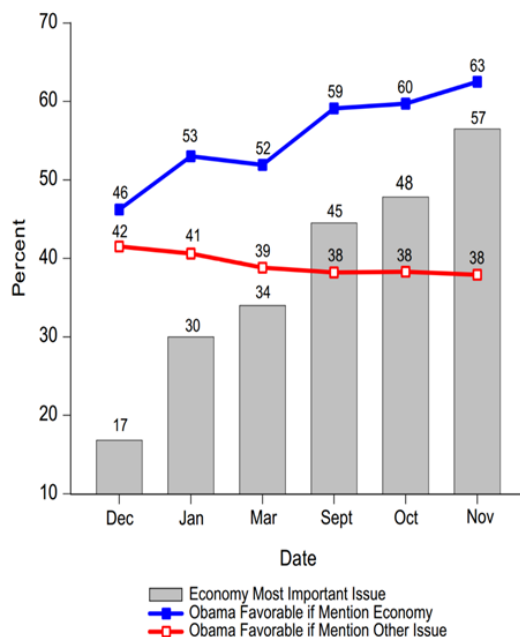
Table 1: Economic Perceptions in the 2008 Presidential Election

	Socio-retro	Ego-retro	Socio-prospect	Ego-prospect
Better	1	10	29	29
Same	5	36	16	36
Worse	94	54	55	35

Source: Lewis-Beck & Nadeau 2009 pp 479

The 2008 presidential election provides an example of the impact of the state of the national economy on politics. Over the course of the electoral campaign, economy was going into a freefall. Barack Obama was to convince the electorate worried about the perilous economic conditions. His campaign slogans such as “Yes We Can!” and “Change You Can Believe in!” proved highly effective to convince voters that Obama was the effective president to settle down not only the economic issues but also other vexing problems that the nation was confronting. The prospective vision of his administration to stop the economic downslide and restore credibility to the United States benefited Obama.

Figure 2: Obama’s Favorability Ratings, December 2007–November 2008¹



Source: Scotto et al pp .548

The Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) data revealed that Obama was positively viewed by the growing number of voters who considered economy as their most important issue. From December 2007 to October 2008, his favorability rating increased from 46% to 60%. However, Obama’s favorability was lower in the minds of individual voters to whom economy had not weighed so heavily. (See figure on the previous page) Nevertheless, by the end of the campaign, Obama proved himself to “own” economy which defined his political agenda.

Obama’s success was also facilitated by his rival John McCain who proclaimed that he knew little about economics. He stated: “The issue of economics is not something I’ve understood as well as I should... I’ve got Greenspan’s book” (Qtd Scotto et al.545). Obama highlighted sharp contrasts between himself and the Republican candidate McCain and President Bush. He portrayed himself as having the required traits to be a successful president able to rule the country in a time of national crisis, as he knew that voters were highly influenced by leader images while trying to make sensible decisions in a political world of high stakes and considerable uncertainty. This led to a sharp rise in the polls in his favor.

His victory resulted from the electors’ disapproval of the bad economic conditions. Most voters did not vote for Obama, they voted rather against the Bush Administration seeking change. Lewis-Beck & Nadeau (2009) stated that a voter “may vote with party X regardless of whether it is incumbent, if that party is closer to his or her position on an economic policy.”(pp 479) They concluded by stating that

Gloom over the American economy found no precedent in contemporary times. This gloomy view translated itself sharply into a vote against McCain, for many felt the incumbent Republican administration was responsible. Even among those who did not consciously pin the material misery directly on President Bush, many must have undoubtedly responded to the “nature of the times,” which was scary.

5. Conclusion

Commentators attributed the unprecedented victory of Barack Obama in the presidential elections of 2008 to various and manifold factors. Many of them pointed to his famous slogan 'Change We Can', which was age-old. The slogan can be traced back to Obama's early years in politics; as a community organizer, as a Senator to states then to the United States, Obama devoted himself to promote change, defend social and civil rights, and fight against corruption. Obama promised change, equality, freedom, and a chance to pursue happiness, expressing a shift from traditional views of the American society to a more diverse.

Other analysts pointed to important factors that helped place Obama in the office of the President of the United States. The efforts endeavored by his advisers in using new generation technologies in the electoral campaign, his calmness, and his agenda to deal with the Great Recession were all behind his victory.

This victory discredited the dehumanizing bigotry which characterized the United States during the Jim Crow period. Insensitive statements, nooses, and confederate flags that expressed racism have been politically corrected. Yet, structural racism and racial disparities could not be removed once and for all. Some observers argued that the Obama's victory could promote equal redistributions of services, wealth, and employment. Obama could bring change wherever was needed.

Conflict of Interest

I declare that I have no conflict of interest

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