

Ten reasons why Obama won

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In the waning weeks of the 2008 campaign, John McCain warned voters that if they pulled the lever for Barack Obama, they would be electing the least tested, least experienced president in U.S. history. Some said this was negative campaigning. It was negative, I suppose, but it was hardly a below-the-belt punch: McCain's assertion is true—or, rather, there's some truth to it—but the American people knew this already, and a majority of them voted for Obama anyway. Why? Here are 10 reasons, all of them reinforcing, which together created a fertile political ecosystem for Obama's historic candidacy, and an insurmountably arid environment for McCain.

I. John McCain's age: It turned out that this factor trumped race. It surfaced as an issue early in the summer—even before McCain turned 72 during the Democratic National Convention—when 21 percent of respondents told the Pew Research Center that McCain was “too old to be president.” By late October, this figure had grown to 34 percent. That is a big number. This underlying aspect of the campaign wasn't covered overly much by the media, and Obama was careful to refer to it only obliquely, but it was always there: John Sidney McCain III would have been the oldest person ever elected to a first term as president.

Whether this was fair or not, many voters were simply not comfortable with that prospect. Too many swing voters came to the conclusion that McCain's optimum window of opportunity came in 2000, and that the Republican Party should have nominated him then. Eight years ago, McCain swept to a resounding victory over George W. Bush in the first primary, in New

Hampshire, where McCain has always been popular. But that was his time. This is Obama's time, and he carried New Hampshire on Tuesday by just over 10 percentage points.

II. The shrinking Republican brand: When Ronald Reagan left office in 1989, 40 percent of Americans self-identified as Republicans. McCain and Sarah Palin were running on a Republican ticket in a year when 27 percent of Americans classify themselves that way. The main reason cited for this decline is...well, George W. Bush. Bush has been president and titular head of the Grand Old Party for the past eight years, and his job approval rating hovers just below 30 percent. This number puts him in the company of the likes of Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter in their waning days in office. The White House switched parties after they left office. McCain's own problems ran even deeper. The single policy that hurt Bush's standing the most was the decision to invade and occupy Iraq. McCain championed this course of action himself, and did so throughout the campaign.

Other factors eroded Republican standing as well. They included the perception that the Republican Congress had used its majority to pursue a narrowly and parochial legislative agenda, to run up huge federal budget deficits, and to enrich their own political coffers—sometimes enriching their own private bank accounts—on the backs of the greater public good. Ethical lapses and outright criminality landed several prominent Republican congressional leaders in prison. Others are heading there. McCain hoped that his reputation as a “maverick” who bucked his party, who railed against pork-barrel spending, and who had stood up to the Bush White House on highly visible issues would spare him from the fallout of his toxic party label. It did not, even after he picked a vice presidential nominee with a similar reputation for pushing reform and fiscal responsibility. Finally, McCain was operating in a

shifting media environment in which everyone from daytime talk show hosts to Hollywood filmmakers; from supposedly objective political journalists to unfettered left-leaning bloggers felt free to bash the Republican Party in general, and the GOP ticket in particular. In the end, what McCain and Palin could not escape was the “R” after their names.

III: Candidate Obama really was ‘The One’: In 2007, after seeing Obama at an event in Boston, I called a well-known political writer living in semi-retirement in California and asked him if he’d ever seen a candidate with this much charisma. This political writer, with whom I share a surname, is an acclaimed author who is recognized as the foremost expert on Ronald Reagan. He paused a minute and said, “Yes, I have. John F. Kennedy was like this.” After another moment, he added. “The early Reagan was, too.” That’s good company Obama is keeping. McCain tried to make hay over Obama’s ability to float above normal scrutiny—but this is a trait that successful presidential candidates share. So is good luck. Obama seemed to have it all. He combined, in some odd alchemy, Kennedy’s discipline as a campaigner, Bill Clinton’s gift of gab, and Ronald Reagan’s optimism and Teflon quality. In other words, Obama rarely made mistakes on the campaign trail, and when he did, they didn’t really stick. Obama also appears to be an utterly devoted family man—voters still want that in the wake of the Clinton years—while offering the most untraditional résumé and family background we’ve ever had in a president.

In the end, the biracial aspect of his candidacy appealed not just to African American voters (read this poignant reminder), but also to tens of millions of socially liberal whites, Latinos, immigrants, and young people. Obama is handsome and likeable, and a natural orator. He put together a superb campaign organization, and he never once lost his cool. “One of the most

extraordinary candidates ever,” conservative political writer Fred Barnes acknowledged Tuesday night while commentating on Fox News. “What a great campaigner. What a great campaign. So self-disciplined, so strong on the stump...”

IV: Young voters fell for Obama early—and stayed with him: I’ve written about this phenomenon for 18 months, on this blog and elsewhere, including here, or here, and even here, but it just can’t be emphasized enough. Some 47 million Americans are under 30 years of age. This is a huge cohort, and those in it finally lay to rest the canard that the young don’t vote. It was always overstated, this claim, but it’s now simply no longer true. A majority of this group has chosen a political party (the Democrats), identified their own brand of purpose-driven politics, and rallied to the banner of a presidential candidate named Barack Hussein Obama. Did that name bother them? Not at all. It only enhanced the man’s appeal to these young, tolerant, and post-racialist Americans. In 2004, 18-29 was the only age bracket won by John Kerry (he carried them by an estimated 9 percentage points). An extensive Reader’s Digest survey done this summer by prophetic pollster John Della Volpe showed that Hillary Clinton led McCain by about the same percentage. But when Obama was paired against McCain, this number jumped to a whopping 23 points. Della Volpe recently released another poll, done under the auspices of Harvard’s Institute of Politics, showing that these numbers had held steady.

This gave Obama an insurmountable advantage—one, I am convinced, that was undercounted through most of the year. Only in the last two weeks of the campaign were the young adequately represented in polling samples, I believe, and this is one reason why Obama began pulling steadily away. Tuesday night’s exit polls proved that young voters formed a base of

support for Obama that simply could not be overcome by McCain—there just aren't enough older voters. Take Ohio, for example. Tuesday's exit polls showed that voters over 65 years of age—who constituted 18 percent of the electorate—went for McCain by a margin of 56 percent to 43 percent. Yet these votes were more than offset by Ohio voters under 30, who turned out in similar numbers—with 64 percent of them voting Democratic. “Young voters have dispelled the notion of an apathetic generation ... by voting in record numbers today,” crowed Heather Smith, the executive director of Rock the Vote. “The Millennial generation is making their mark on politics and shaping our future.” She's right.

V: Democrats closed the “technology gap”—and then some: In the past several presidential elections, Republicans have had it all over the Democrats when it came to harnessing computer, network, and Internet technology to run campaigns and mine votes. This year was Politics 2.0, and it was owned by young people, Democrats, and the Obama campaign. The first Obama rally at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia was organized on Facebook by college students back on February 2, 2007—before there was an Obama campaign infrastructure at all. When there was a Barack Obama for President campaign, it harnessed the amazing power of human networks, learning as it went, not insisting on trying to control the conversation from the top, but delegating to its vast regiments of tech-savvy young supporters to keep the network viral and vibrant.

In early September, when Obama committed one of his few slips of the tongue—he used the phrase “lipstick on a pig” days after Sarah Palin quipped in her acceptance speech that the difference between a “hockey mom” and a pit bull was lipstick—within hours, Obama's interactive cadre had posted on YouTube a clip of John McCain using the same phrase himself. And so it went

for the better part of two years. Late in the campaign, taking a suggestion from a youthful backer, the Obama campaign unveiled a technology allowing supporters to let the campaign tap into their mobile phone directories—and send reminders to phone friends in battleground states.

Along the way, the Obamacons changed how American politics will be practiced, probably forever.

VI: Money talks: “Money is the mother’s milk of politics,” legendary California Democrat (and Reagan adversary) Jesse “Big Daddy” Unruh was fond of saying. Well, nobody in Sacramento politics, including Reagan himself, ever saw anything like the Obama fundraising machine of 2008. This is a campaign that raised more than \$600 million—more than it needed, more than it could spend—which allowed it to campaign and to air ads in every part of Ohio, to run high-dollar get-out-the-vote drives in traditionally Republican states, to stage first-class outdoor events catering to hundreds of thousands of people, to emerge flush even in the wake of the most expensive primary campaign in history, to eschew federal matching money (breaking a campaign promise in the process), to outspend McCain in every swing state, and to buy half-hour infomercials on the major networks in prime time less than a week before the election.

Democrats, Obama included, have threatened to restore the so-called “Fairness Doctrine,” a dubious governmental regulation that supposedly supplied equal access to the nation’s airwaves. Bringing it back would be an appalling government intrusion into the marketplace of ideas, but now that Obama has won, I suspect the president-elect will recalibrate his stance on that—just as he did on accepting federal campaign finance limitations when it became clear he could shatter all existing fundraising records. Why do I say

that? Because if a “Fairness Doctrine” had been in place, the networks would have had to provide McCain equal time on television—even though he didn’t have the money to pay for it. Obama had a huge advantage, which he exploited ruthlessly and effectively.

VII: Intangible reason Number 1 (international opinion): Obama was immensely popular around the world. Those adoring throngs that hailed him on his European tour this summer were no illusion. Reader’s Digest commissioned an extensive scientific survey in 17 nations in June and July. Our Global Presidential Poll showed a preference in the head-to-head polls of a bracing magnitude: In the Netherlands, 92 percent for Obama, 8 percent McCain. In Germany, 85 percent to 7 percent. This phenomenon wasn’t only present in western Europe. It existed in Asia (Taiwan’s preference was 81 percent for Obama to 6 percent for McCain.) It was true in South America, as Brazil’s numbers were 78 percent to 11. It was found in Australia, a predominately white nation and member of President Bush’s “coalition of the willing”—where Obama was favored over McCain 76 percent to 10 percent.

So it went in every nation we polled, on every continent. Foreigners cannot vote in our election, and they aren’t supposed to send money, either. But Americans have been concerned with our standing in the world since Thomas Jefferson prefaced the Declaration of Independence with the notation that “a respect to the decent opinion of mankind” required Americans to lay out their case to the international community. We are still doing so—and the Reader’s Digest global poll shows that the world is still listening, and still watching what we do. They are especially interested in our presidential elections. This time, they wanted the only child of a visiting Kenyan student and an independent, young white woman from Kansas to become the leader

of the free world. They got their wish, in one small part because Americans still desire the approbation of the world.

VIII: Intangible reason Number 2; the "Bradley Backlash": Tuesday's election returns finally laid to rest a hoary theory known as the "Bradley effect," which postulated that when African American candidates run statewide, there is leakage in their pre-election polling and their actual vote totals. Presumably, this is because white voters lie to pollsters about their preference so as to conceal their hidden bigotry. This theory was a favorite of liberal college professors and the identity politics crowd within the Democratic Party, but there never was much to it. I've debunked it myself ([click here](#)), but now I suggest that there's a little-understood flip side to the argument—and that it helped Obama get elected president. Let's call it the Cannon Effect.

My theory concerns the behavior of like-minded and moderate swing voters who do not base their politics on racial issues, but who nonetheless harbored misgivings about Obama's experience and even some of his policies. Yet many of them went for Obama anyway, partly because they don't want to live in a country where every other elected Democrat, both Howard Dean and his brother Jim, as well as numerous political commentators, liberal college professors, European visitors, and Hollywood blowhards would be braying every day for the next four years about what a racist country the United States remains. "I couldn't take listening to that crap," one prominent print journalist quipped to Loose Cannon. "I'd commit suicide—or maybe a homicide. I have to vote for Obama." He was kidding, but kidding on the square. So was I, by the way, in calling it the Cannon Effect. Let's give credit where it's due, because this effect only works with a candidate who has a soothing effect on swing voters. Yes, this "effect" must be named after the

man who actually pulled it off, and, who, in the process, pulled the rug out from those who had such small-minded views of the American people. It's the Obama Effect.

IX: The sour mood of the electorate. Political scientists like to tell us that when the negative answer to a famous poll question—"Do you believe the country is on the right track or the wrong track?"—reaches 50 percent, the incumbent and the incumbent's party is in trouble. Recent polls show the wrong track question approaching 80 percent. These are not only historic highs, they were enormous barriers for the Republican ticket of John McCain and Sarah Palin to overcome. These numbers also help explain President Bush's sub-30 percent approval rating.

On Tuesday, the media consortium doing exit polling posed a question to American voters: "If John McCain were elected would he mainly (a) continue the policies of George W. Bush; or (b) take the country in a different direction? The voters split on that question 48 percent to 48 percent. This tells you why Governor Palin kept stressing that mantra of "maverick, maverick, maverick." It also shows you that it worked to a degree—but not enough. The voters were angry and worried—and wanted change. That word just happened to be Barack Obama's mantra.

X: The global world economic crisis. Despite the nine factors listed above, the Republican ticket was within the margin of error in mid-September when the financial crisis hit. Neither McCain, nor Obama had done much of anything to cause the problems in the housing and mortgage banking sectors that froze up credit around the world, sunk banks, and wreaked havoc with stock prices; yet this development altered the dynamic of the election almost overnight.

The first to pounce on the catastrophe for partisan purposes was Moveon.org, which aired an attack ad blaming the mess on former Senator Phil Gramm, a McCain ally and campaign financial adviser. (“John McCain’s friend Phil Gramm wrote the bill that deregulated the banking industry, and stripped the safeguards that would have protected us,” the ad intoned.) This claim was untrue, and was unraveled in unusually blunt language by a respected independent group, Factcheck.org. Fighting back, the McCain campaign aired a dubious ad of its own that blamed Obama for the crisis, and quoting former President Clinton (selectively) to do it. Such are the typical, and sometimes unfortunate, impulses at work in a partisan political campaign.

But there were larger forces in play—one in particular: Obama’s “change” theme suddenly came into focus for millions of undecided voters. Until the financial crisis, discerning and independent-minded Americans had been quietly asking themselves just what kind of change Obama had in mind. When they saw enthusiastic young crowds chant “Yes we can!” at Obama rallies, they would ask themselves. “Can... do what?” When Obama advertisements and signs would tout “Change You Can Believe In?” they would wonder just what manner of change the candidate had in mind. The financial crisis swept those doubts aside. Millions of undecided voters conjured up the same thought: I don’t know exactly what ‘change’ Obama has in mind, but anything is better than this. Once that concept took root, the great election of 2008 was essentially over, except for the counting of the votes.

Could McCain have done anything differently? Sure. Conservatives believe the campaign should have tethered Obama’s pastor Jeremiah Wright, along with the clergyman’s longtime American bashing, to Obama’s back and made him tote that burden everywhere. Worried that this would introduce racial tension in the campaign in an unhealthy way, McCain shied away from that tactic.

Meanwhile, McCain was getting it from the other side of the spectrum, too, as the groupthink among liberal commentators coalesced around the idea that the McCain they knew and loved in 2000 had morphed into a hard-right attack dog—and picked a pit bull as a running mate. In my estimation, this is unfair, and backwards besides: McCain got a little desperate because he could see he faced insurmountable barriers—he didn't face insurmountable barriers because his campaign rhetoric was harsh.

There is, however, some evidence that McCain's own temperament wasn't what people were looking for after eight years of George W. Bush. The former Navy aviator and hero of the Hanoi Hilton reacted to the financial crisis first by trying to soothe a worried nation. "The fundamentals of the economy are strong," McCain said on September 15. This may yet prove to be true—we all hope so—and McCain may have been trying to prevent panic at a time when preventing panic was a patriotic impulse. But it both misread the gravity of the problem and the public's mistrust of Washington's ability to fix it. Then, nine days later, McCain abruptly tacked into the wind again, announcing he was "suspending" his campaign to come back to Washington to inject himself into contentious negotiations between Senate Democrats and House Republicans—and between Congress and the White House. By contrast, Barack Obama's impulse was to be cautious when dealing with the financial mess, an approach that may seem at odds with Obama's soaring rhetoric, but which actually represented a better reading of the public mood.

McCain's gracious concession late Tuesday night left even many of those who had voted against him with warm feelings. Where was that John McCain for the past three months asked liberal commentators such as my friend E.J. Dionne. My own mother asked me the same question this morning. I submit that the answer is that he was buried under an avalanche of difficulties,

almost none of his own making. Tuesday night, after Ohio had fallen in the Democratic column and the result of the election quickly became a foregone conclusion, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, one of the Republicans who had himself sought the presidential nomination, reminded us that John McCain was the Republican with the broadest national appeal. McCain was the only possible Republican who could have prevailed in this environment, Hizzoner maintained. “No Republican would have done better,” Giuliani said. “John McCain did better than any Republican would have done.”