

**YES WE CAN! VALENCE POLITICS AND ELECTORAL CHOICE**

**IN AMERICA, 2008**

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The claim that the 2008 presidential election was a transformative one is fast becoming part of the “conventional wisdom” of American politics. Despite the election's undoubted significance, this paper argues that factors affecting voting decisions were strikingly similar to those operating in many previous presidential elections. Using data from the CCAP six-wave national election survey, we demonstrate that a valence politics model provides a powerful, parsimonious explanation of the ballot decisions Americans made in 2008. As is typical in presidential elections, candidate images had major effects on electoral choice. Controlling for several other relevant factors, racial attitudes were strongly associated with how voters reacted to the candidates. Other models of electoral choice, such as a Downsian issue-proximity model, are also relevant, but their explanatory power is considerably less than that provided by the valence politics model.

## **YES WE CAN! VALENCE POLITICS AND ELECTORAL CHOICE IN AMERICA, 2008**

The claim that the 2008 presidential election was a transformative one, which, at the very least, ranks with the 1932 election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is fast becoming part of the “conventional wisdom” of American politics. Despite the election's undoubted significance, in this paper we argue that the factors affecting individual-level voting decisions are strikingly similar to those operative in many previous presidential elections. In particular, we contend that the valence politics model of electoral choice that we have employed in analyses of voting in earlier elections in the United States, Canada and Great Britain (e.g., Clarke et al. 2004, 2009; Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009) provides a powerful, parsimonious explanation of the ballot decisions Americans made in 2008. Other models of electoral choice, such as the Downsian issue-proximity model, are also relevant, but their explanatory power is considerably smaller than that provided by the valence politics model.

**The Valence Politics Model:** Informed by recent work in disciplines such as experimental economics and cognitive psychology (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2008; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; see also Sniderman, Tetlock and Brody, 1991), the valence politics model endows voters with agency, not omniscience. The model has three principal explanatory variables. First are valence issues. As originally conceptualized by Donald Stokes (1963; see also Stokes, 1992), valence issues are ones upon which there is a strong consensus on policy goals. Valence issues are important because they typically dominate political discourse in national election campaigns. A canonical example is the economy; in the United States and elsewhere there is near universal agreement that economic prosperity, coupled with low rates of inflation and unemployment, are unalloyed "good

things." There are numerous other valence issues as well. For example, almost everyone is opposed to terrorism, crime in the streets and other threats to national and personal security. And, overwhelming majorities favor affordable, high quality health care and educational systems, safe, efficient transportation, and an attractive, pollution-free environment. In all cases, the identifying characteristic of valence issues is their one-sided opinion distribution. Since the electorate is not divided on salient policy goals as is assumed by Downsian issue-proximity models, political debate about valence issues focuses on questions of "who?" and "how?" not "what?"

Partisanship is the second explanatory variable in the valence politics model. However, rather than being an "unmoved mover" as per the original "Michigan" conception of party identification (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960, 1966; see also Miller and Shanks, 1996), partisanship in the valence politics model has dynamic properties. This dynamic is not only an aggregate-level phenomenon or one confined to exceptional periods of societal upheaval; rather, there is potential ongoing mutability at the individual level. Using Fiorina's (1981) felicitous metaphor, at any point in time partisanship is akin to a summary "running tally" of voters' evaluations of, and emotional reactions to, party and leader performance. Existing evaluations and emotional reactions [are] progressively discounted in favor of more recent ones (see also Achen, 1992; Franklin and Jackson, 1983; Franklin, 1992).

Although the idea that partisan attachments have dynamic properties has been disputed (e.g., Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002), analyses of ANES and other panel survey data gathered since the 1950s clearly demonstrate that sizable numbers of people change their partisanship over relatively short time horizons (e.g., Clarke, Kornberg and

Scotto, 2009; Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009). Moreover, partisan dynamics have a "quotidian quality"—voters adopt and abandon partisan ties in response to a variety of forces in the political arena and not just in reaction to cataclysmic events such as wars, depressions, or other major societal disruptions. Although potentially mutable, at any given time partisan attachments provide voters with easily accessible, cost effective cues that summarize cognitive and emotional reactions relevant to making electoral choices (e.g., Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock, 1991).

Party leader images are the third component of the valence politics model. In the world of valence politics, leader images perform psychological functions similar to partisanship. Voters use information about leaders as "fast and frugal" heuristic devices for making decisions in contexts of high stakes and abundant uncertainty (Gigerenzer, 2008). In a sense, voters are smart enough to know that there is a lot about which they are ignorant. Since the costs of acquiring "full information" are very high, indeed, insuperable (see, e.g., Conlisk, 1996), voters react by looking for a "safe pair of hands," i.e., someone capable of steering the ship of state safely into an unknown and possibly hazardous future (Clarke, Kornberg, Scotto 2009; see also Lupia and McCubbins, 1998).

**Data:** The data employed in this paper were gathered in national surveys of the American electorate conducted in the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP). The CCAP study, coordinated by Simon Jackman and Lynn Vavreck, employed a six-wave panel design in which a national sample of 18,250 eligible voters was queried via internet surveys. Fieldwork was conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix. Analyses presented below rely largely on the October 2008 wave for measures of independent variables, and the dependent variable, voting behavior, is measured using

data gathered immediately after the election in the November 2008 wave of the survey. The CCAP data are based on a sample of registered voters and, as Figure 1 shows, vote shares closely approximate those actually obtained by Senators Barack Obama and John McCain. Obama and McCain's respective CCAP vote shares are 51.9 percent and 46.2 percent—only 1.0 percent and 0.5 percent off their actual totals.

(Figure 1 about here)

### **Prologue**

As the 2008 campaign was about to begin, it was evident that the Democrats were in a strong position. In 2006, they had set the stage for regaining the White House by wresting control of both Houses of Congress from a Republican Party which, after 12 years as the majority, was in disarray, beset by both financial and ethical scandals. The pro-Democratic mood was abundantly evident in academic surveys and public opinion polls that showed the Democrats having a sizable lead in the number of party identifiers. The lead held throughout the year such that the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2008 pre-election survey showed that 34 percent identified as Democrats and only 26 percent as Republicans (see Figure 2). CCAP surveys which sampled only people who were *registered* to vote also indicated a substantial Democratic advantage; for example, in the October wave, 36 percent of the respondents stated that they were Democrats and 30 percent claimed to be Republicans.<sup>1</sup>

(Figure 2 about here)

There were other pro-Democratic forces at work as well. U.S. forces were bogged down in two seemingly endless wars that were draining American lives and treasure and for which the Bush Administration was widely blamed—and not just by

Democrats. In addition, unlike in 2000 when Bill Clinton left office with the goodwill of some two-thirds of the American people, in 2008 George Bush was one of the least popular presidents in modern history. Finally, and never good news for an incumbent party, the storm clouds of a serious economic recession were gathering on the horizon.

Regardless whether Senator Hillary Clinton or Senator Barack Obama emerged as the Democratic candidate (after an extremely hard-fought and seemingly endless series of primaries and caucuses), history would be made in 2008. Either the first woman or the first African American would be the Democratic candidate for president. Clinton began her campaign with most political commentators judging that her victory was inevitable. Although she won primary elections in large states such as New York, California, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Texas, Senator Obama was also gathering large numbers of convention delegates, both in these states as well as in caucus states such as Iowa, Wyoming, Utah, North Dakota, Kansas, and Idaho.

In the event, the complex formula the Democratic Party had adopted for apportioning convention delegates enabled Obama to build a delegate lead which proved insurmountable. His victory signalled that the tectonic plates of American national politics were shifting. Only 44 years after the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, an African American, a virtual political unknown until 2004, and a first-term Senator defeated the first woman ever to be a finalist for one of the two major party's presidential nominations. Despite these history-making events, analyses presented below indicate that the forces affecting electoral choice had not changed appreciably between 2000 and 2008. Only the outcome differed, and it did so in great part because of the context in

which the 2008 campaign was waged. A steadily worsening economy was a key part of that context.

### **The Economic Meltdown**

The economic malaise which beset the United States in late 2007 and 2008 had its origin in the vast expansion of the housing and commercial properties industry, the so-called “Housing Bubble” which morphed into the “subprime mortgage crisis” (e.g., Akerlof and Shiller, 2009; Shiller, 2006). In turn, the latter spawned other crises: in the banking and investment sectors; in the insurance industry; in the automobile industry; in thousands of other businesses, large and small because of a liquidity crisis (the inability/unwillingness of banks to extend credit because of their own perilous conditions); huge job losses and layoffs; the threat of state and local government bankruptcies; and a rapidly deepening deficit of public confidence.

Figure 3 illustrates the growing negativity in public evaluations of the economy. Between December 2007 and November 2008, the percentage of CCAP respondents judging that the economy had declined over the past year rose from 68 percent to fully 93 percent. Moreover, a majority of Americans were not optimistic about things improving in the near future. Throughout 2008, approximately half of CCAP respondents reported that they believed economic conditions would deteriorate in the year ahead.<sup>2</sup> The gloomy CCAP figures are not unique. Rather, as Figure 4 indicates, the index of consumer sentiment was firmly ensconced in the negative zone throughout all of Bush's second term, and then moved even further downward as the 2008 election approached.

(Figures 3 and 4 about here)



As noted, these economic blues were grounded in many things, not the least of which was the level of unemployment which rose steadily from 4.9 percent in January 2008 to 6.8 percent in November. Symbolic of the deepening malaise was the bankruptcy announcement by the venerable Wall Street Bank, Lehman Brothers—which had survived the Great Depression, World War Two, the stagflation of the 1970s and the Savings and Loan crisis of the 1980s. The Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve Board, which previously had saved another bank, Bear-Stearns, by forcing its sale to a much larger bank, J.P. Morgan Chase, at a fraction of the former’s capital value, refused to intervene to prevent Lehman’s demise. Not only did Lehman’s failure have an immediate negative effect on economic conditions in the United States, but similar problems also began to affect Europe and Asia as the contagion spread throughout the world economy.

Not surprisingly, the electorate reacted. Figure 5 reveals that the percentage of people who cited “the economy” or some aspect thereof as the most important problem more than tripled between December 2007 and November 2008, increasing from 17 percent in December 2007 to 30 percent in January 2008, to 48 percent in October, and then to 56 percent immediately after the election. Conversely, citations of the Iraq War, the unpopularity of which had cost the Republicans dearly in the 2006 Congressional elections (Clarke, Kornberg and Scotto, 2009), declined from 12 percent to 3.2 percent; healthcare declined from 12.4 percent to 3.6 percent; and immigration from 12.1 percent to 3.3 percent. Mentions of the threat of terrorism, the valence issue which had helped George Bush win re-election in 2004, was a non-starter in 2008, with citations as the

most important issue declining from 8.0 percent to 4.8 percent over the six CCAP surveys.<sup>3</sup>

(Figure 5 about here)

When asked which party would do the best job dealing with what they considered to be the most important issue, the proportion of CCAP respondents citing the Democrats rose steadily from 32 percent to 41 percent over the course of the campaign (Figure 6). Confidence in the Republicans was much less widespread. They were endorsed by only 29 percent in January 2008 and exactly the same percentage did so in the October pre-election survey. The Democratic advantage on the economy is also suggested by an analysis comparing Senator Obama's favourable-unfavourable evaluations among those who responded that the economy was the most important issue facing the country to those who did not across all five pre-election waves of the CCAP. In every survey, people citing the economy overwhelmingly favoured Obama whereas those emphasizing other issues tended to be more negative towards him. Data from the October CCAP survey illustrate the pattern. In this survey, 63 percent of those mentioning the economy had a favorable opinion of Obama, and only 29 percent had an unfavorable opinion (data not shown). Among those citing other issues as most important, the comparable percentages were 42 percent and 53 percent, respectively. These figures suggest that the electorate's growing concern with the economy as the campaign progressed benefited the Democratic candidate. Multivariate analyses presented below provide further evidence that voters' growing preoccupation with the economic crisis and the accompanying belief that the Democrats were best able to deal with it were important factors driving the election outcome.

(Figure 6 about here)

### **Flexible Partisanship**

As observed above, there is now considerable empirical evidence documenting aggregate- and individual-level dynamics in the partisan attachments of American voters. ANES data are illustrative. In 2004, 32 percent of the ANES pre-election respondents declared that they were Democrats, 29 percent said they were Republicans and 39 indicated that they were Independents. Four years later, these figures were 35 percent, 26 percent and 40 percent, respectively, thereby indicating the gap between the Democratic and Republican partisan shares had widened from 3 percent to 9 percent. Gallup data tell essentially the same story, with the Republican share eroding after 2004 such that by October 2008 the Democrats led in identifications by a comfortable margin.<sup>4</sup> Aggregate partisan dynamics thus gave the Democrats an important advantage in 2008. The CCAP panel data indicate that this advantage persisted over the campaign, with the size of the Democratic partisan lead varying from six to eight percent.

This is not to say that the Democratic partisan advantage was "fixed in stone." Rather, the December 2007-November 2008 six-wave CCAP panel data document considerable individual-level instability. As Figure 7 illustrates, when answering the first question in the traditional ANES party identification battery, nearly one CCAP respondent in five reported changing their partisanship at least once over the six-wave panel. Although the vast majority of these changes were between identification and independence (data not shown), this substantial instability is clearly inconsistent with the notion that partisanship is an "unmoved mover" in the skein of causal forces driving electoral choice.

(Figure 7 about here)

It bears emphasis that this observed instability in the panel data is not an artefact of measurement error. Rather, mixed Markov latent class models of ANES inter-election panel data gathered over the past half century tell the same story (Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009). Controlling for random measurement error, the size of "mover chains" is always sufficiently sizable to be electorally consequential. Nor is the finding an artefact of question wording. Indeed, analyses of an alternative "party supporter" question battery asked in the CCAP panel indicate that of one respondent in three moved from being a party supporter to a non-supporter at least once (Figure 7).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, the CCAP data indicate the Democrats enjoyed a partisan edge throughout the 2008 campaign, but the data also emphasize the point that that edge could not be taken for granted. The CCAP surveys indicate that a sizable number of voters (43 percent) made up their minds how they would cast their ballots at the time of the party conventions or later.<sup>6</sup> Typical of American presidential elections, many of them did so in reaction to their perceptions of the candidates.

### **Candidate Images**

One thing the Republicans had going for them in 2008 was their presidential candidate, John McCain, Senator from Arizona, engineer of the "Straight-Talk Express" and regarded by millions of Americans as one of the country's genuine heroes. His first attempt to win his party's nomination in 2000 had run aground in a bitterly contested primary against George W. Bush in South Carolina. However, he emerged from his first try for the presidency more popular than ever with the general public and with much of the media. He was not, however equally admired by some of his Republican colleagues

in the Senate or by the Bush Administration. The decidedly mixed feelings about McCain on the part of the former were grounded in his reputation of being a conservative on most economic issues, but one who could “work across the aisle” on issues that he felt should transcend partisanship. Thus, he and liberal Democrat Russ Feingold co-sponsored the McCain-Feingold legislation on campaign finance reform. He joined with liberal icon Ted Kennedy on immigration and education reform and with Joseph Lieberman and a number of other middle of the road Democrats and Republicans to resolve a prolonged battle in the Senate over judicial nominations made by the Bush administration.

Figure 8 illustrates the positive image of McCain held by many Americans. By a wide margin, the CCAP data reveal that voters regarded him as more experienced and patriotic than Barack Obama, and slightly more trustworthy although people judged that Obama was more likely to improve America’s standing in the world. Given these relatively positive judgments about him, it might seem that, to the extent that leader images matter, McCain’s presidential prospects were reasonably good. However, there is substantial research suggesting that how voters react *emotionally* to candidates also plays an important role in their overall assessments of them (e.g. Conover and Feldman 1986; Marcus and MacKuen 1993). If so, Figure 9 which displays the CCAP data on the public’s *emotional reactions* to the candidates tells a somewhat different story. Here Obama had a discernible but not a dramatic edge. Much more than McCain, Obama made people feel “hopeful” (50-39 percent) whereas McCain made them feel more ashamed (29-22 percent). McCain also made people feel slightly angrier and less proud than did Obama. Overall, neither candidate had an image that was markedly superior to

that of his rival. McCain's lead on character and competence traits was countered by Obama's ability to engender more positive emotional reactions.<sup>7</sup>

(Figures 8 and 9 about here)

What were the sources of voters' images of Messrs. Obama and McCain? As in other presidential elections, one major source was the coverage that the candidates received in the print and electronic media. Although formal content analysis evidence is not yet available, impressionistically it appears that throughout the campaign Obama received very favorable coverage from much of the major print and electronic media (e.g., New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, MSNBC, NBC). Commentators waxed rapturous about Obama's oratorical skills—not since Ronald Reagan and perhaps not even since FDR had America heard so articulate, intelligent, thoughtful and compelling a speaker. His widely covered campaign stops drew overflow crowds in the thousands, and his major addresses, such as his Philadelphia speech on race and his moving victory speeches at the beginning and end of his campaigns in Iowa and North Carolina, respectively, were widely praised.

In contrast, McCain was no longer the media favourite he had been when he made his first bid for the presidency eight years earlier. Former friends and admirers in the press now accused him of selling out to leaders of the Christian Right in an effort to secure its support. These were the same figures, they noted, McCain had denounced in 2000 as “agents of intolerance.” Equally important, in their view, was McCain's misguided insistence that the U.S. should continue to prosecute the Iraq War, and his misplaced optimism about the success of the troop “surge” implemented by President Bush. In addition, McCain's selection of Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska as his running

mate unleashed a torrent of criticism in the editorial pages, syndicated columns, and political talk shows. The charge was straightforward; McCain was irresponsible for choosing someone who was seen to be manifestly unsuited for high office.

Despite McCain's less than flattering treatment by much of the media during the 2008 campaign, as demonstrated above, his image was not markedly inferior to Obama's. In this regard, it is important to recognize that candidate images have multiple sources. Partisanship is an important heuristic voters use to judge the likely performance of candidates (e.g., Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock, 1991). But, other group affiliations and identities are relevant as well. In this regard, Obama's status as the first African American presidential candidate of a major party in American history bears scrutiny. In the aftermath of Obama's victory, it might be tempting to conclude that race is no longer relevant in American electoral politics. However, the CCAP data tell quite a different story.

We assess the impact of racial attitudes on candidate images using a four-item ANES battery of "racial resentment" questions included in the CCAP surveys. Respondents with high levels of resentment towards African Americans had much more negative images of Obama's traits than did those with lower levels of resentment (data not shown).<sup>8</sup> The former group also had much more negative emotional reactions to Obama than did the latter ones. For McCain, the patterns are reversed, such that people with high levels of racial resentment had much positive images of him than did those with lower levels of resentment. All of these bivariate relationships are impressive, with correlations ( $r$ 's) averaging .54 for the Obama analyses, and .43 for the McCain ones.

The conclusion that racial attitudes had significant effects on leader images is reinforced by multivariate analyses that control for several other potentially relevant factors. Regressing the leader traits and emotional reactions variables on socio-demographics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, income, education), economic evaluations, party identification, party preferences on most important issue, ideological predispositions (economic and social), and a summary racial resentment variable indicates that the latter had sizable effects on candidate images.<sup>9</sup> Net of all other considerations, a sense of racial resentment towards African Americans was associated with negative images of Barack Obama and positive images of John McCain (see Table 1). In contrast, an absence of racial resentment was associated with positive images of Obama and negative images of McCain.

(Table 1 about here)

The potential importance of these relationships is suggested by the marginal response distributions to the racial attitudes questions. It is not the case that most Americans have low levels of racial resentment. Specifically, pluralities or majorities stated that they believed that African Americans have not been disadvantaged by generations of slavery and discrimination (54 percent v. 30 percent), that African Americans should "work their way up" like other minorities (63 percent v. 17 percent), that if African Americans "tried harder" they could be as successful as whites (42 percent v. 21 percent), and that African Americans have not received less than they deserved (46 percent v. 30 percent). Taken together, the survey data indicate that racial resentment was common and consequential for candidate images in 2008. Analyses presented in the next section demonstrate the large impact of these images on the choices voters made.



### **Rival Models of Electoral Choice**

For well over a half century, political scientists have offered a variety of competing explanations for why Americans vote the way they do. One group, finding inspiration in the work of political sociologists at Columbia University (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld and Macphee, 1954), has emphasized demographic cleavages related to characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. A second group has adhered to the famous "Michigan model" (Campbell et al., 1960, 1966), with its emphasis on the mix of long- and short-term forces generated by durable party identifications, coupled with mutable issue and candidate orientations. A third group, adhering to the "Rochester" rational choice program, has advocated Downsian-type (Downs, 1957) explanations whereby voters maximize their utilities by supporting parties or candidates closest to them in a uni- or multidimensional issue space. As discussed in the introduction, our preferred model is one which accords pride of place to flexible partisan attachments, leader images conceptualized as key heuristic devices, and judgments about proven or anticipated party and leader performance on a range of valence issues concerning, but not limited, to the economy.

Here, we set up a competition among these rival explanations—a "tournament of models." We estimate parameters in the competing voting models using a binomial logit specification (e.g., Long and Freese 2001) with Obama voters scored 1 and McCain voters scored 0. Four statistical yardsticks are employed to assess the explanatory power of the competing models (see Table 2). All of these measures testify to the weakness of the socio-demographic models. For the model including race/ethnicity and all other socio-demographics, the McFadden and McKelvey pseudo  $R^2$ 's are only .14 and .26,

respectively, and the model is able to correctly classify only 67.8 percent of the voters—only 14.9 percent more than could be achieved using a naive mode-guessing approach. A pure economic evaluation model also fares poorly, thereby emphasizing the importance of linking economic conditions to party or leader performance (see, e.g., Stokes, 1963).

Other models exhibit stronger explanatory power. For example, the racial resentment model has pseudo  $R^2$ 's of .31 (McFadden) and .48 (McKelvey) and is able to correctly classify 77.5 percent of the voters. The pure party identification, party best on most important issues and candidate image models also perform relatively well. Stronger still is the valence politics model which includes party identification, party best able to handle most important issue, and candidate images besting its rivals. Its pseudo  $R^2$ 's are .87 (McFadden) and .93 (McKelvey) and it is able to correctly classify fully 96.8 percent of the cases. The valence politics model also has a lower (better) model selection (AIC) value (Burnham and Anderson, 2002) than any of its rivals.

(Table 2 about here)

Notwithstanding its impressive performance, the valence politics model is not the entire story. In this regard, although the Downsian issue-proximity model<sup>10</sup> has a markedly larger (worse) AIC value than its valence rival, the Downsian model does have reasonably strong pseudo  $R^2$ 's and correctly classifies 88.1 percent of the cases. The idea that the valence model's rivals can make distinct contributions to explanation is reinforced by estimating a composite model that incorporates predictor variables from all of the competing models. As Table 2 shows, by narrow margins, the composite model achieves the largest pseudo  $R^2$ 's and the largest percentage of voters correctly classified. Also, despite its richer parameterization, the composite model has the smallest AIC

value. In the language of model comparison, the general conclusion is that the valence politics model dominates but does not formally "encompass" its competitors (Charemza and Deadman, 1997).

Table 3 presents the composite model estimates. As hypothesized, all of valence politics variables have statistically significant and properly signed effects. Thus, positive evaluations of Obama's traits and positive emotional reactions to Obama enhance the likelihood of voting for him, and positive images of McCain lessen that likelihood. Similarly, selection of the Democrats as the party best on the most important issue has a positive impact on voting for Obama, and selection of the Republicans as best has a negative impact. Democratic partisanship also is associated with an increased probability of supporting Obama.

Several other variables have significant effects as well. Consistent with the idea that, net of valence politics effects, issue-proximity influences are at work, close proximity to Obama on position issues increased the likelihood of voting for him, whereas close proximity to McCain diminished that likelihood. There also was a significant direct effect of racial attitudes; persons with lower levels of racial resentment being more likely to vote for Obama. And, controlling for racial attitudes, African Americans were more likely than whites (the race/ethnicity reference group) to vote for Obama. Finally, net of all other considerations, people who approved of the way President Bush had performed in office were less likely to support Obama, as were residents of a Southern state.

(Table 3 about here)

The analyses in Table 3 tell us which variables exerted significant effects on electoral choice, but they do not tell us about the magnitude of the various effects. For this purpose, we constructed scenarios in which all the predictor variables were set at their mean values. We then set each significant predictor at its minimum and maximum values, and calculated how the probability of voting for Obama changed. The results are presented in Figure 10. Overall, candidate images had the strongest effect on the probability of an Obama vote. A positive emotional reaction to the Democratic candidate increased the probability of voting for him by 54 points, and a positive judgment about his traits increased that probability by 84 points. Conversely, similarly positive views of McCain's traits reduced the likelihood of an Obama vote by 63 points, and positive emotional reactions to him, by 84 points.

(Figure 10 about here)

Other factors working in favour of Obama were judgments that the Democrats were best able to handle their most important issue (33 points), feeling close to Obama's ideological position on policy issues (38 points), and being an African-American (23 points). Working against him, and in McCain's favour, were issue proximity to McCain (38 points), judging the Republicans were better on the most important issue (30 points), being a Republican identifier (11 points), racial resentment (7 points) residing in the South (17 points), and approving President Bush's performance (13 points).

(Figure 10 about here)

Taken together, these figures indicate that several factors had strong effects on the likelihood of supporting one of the presidential candidates. Two components of the valence politics model—candidate images and party best able to handle the most

important issue—exert very impressive influences, but they are not the only predictors to do so. Consistent with the superior overall performance of the composite model discussed above, issue-proximities also have large effects. Valence considerations were highly significant, but their influence was supplemented by other considerations. As is usual in presidential elections (e.g., Clarke, Kornberg and Scotto, 2009; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), a variety of forces shaped how voters cast their ballots in 2008.

### **Conclusion: Strong Hand, Played Well**

The 2008 election was, without a doubt, a historic contest. For the first time in American history, an African-American and a woman were rival candidates for their party's nomination. Obama's victory came despite the fact that Senator Clinton won primary elections in virtually every major state including those which in previous elections had decided the presidency. Obama also won despite the disturbing fact that racial resentment remained widespread across the electorate, and racial attitudes strongly influenced how voters reacted to him and his principal general election rival, John McCain.

As is the case in most presidential election post-mortems, the loser has been blamed for running a poor campaign. In McCain's case, the general charge was that his campaign lacked focus because it lacked an overarching theme that would have attracted overwhelming support in his own party and generated additional support among Independents and Democrats—the kind of winning coalitions Republican presidential candidates had built since Nixon's time. In addition, McCain has been accused of making strategic errors during the campaign. One occurred on the eve of the first presidential debate when he announced he was suspending his campaign and returning to

Washington to help deal with the economic crisis. In response, Obama continued his campaign and the economic skies did not immediately fall. McCain then looked foolish when he was forced to reverse himself, return to the campaign trail and participate in the first debate. Another, more serious, mistake or, so it has been argued, was selecting Sarah Palin as his running mate. Inexperienced on the national and international political stages, she manifestly lacked the gravitas expected of someone who, if elected, would be "a heartbeat away" from the presidency.

In the end, Obama's victory was historic, not magical. He won primarily because he was able to exploit the political capital the Democrats had accumulated because of the perceived failures of a massively unpopular incumbent Republican president who had led the country into a bloody, unresolved conflict in Iraq and allowed the economy to slip into a deepening recession that threatened to become a genuine depression. Leveraging abundant financial resources at his disposal, Obama acquitted himself well on the campaign trail. His slogans "Yes We Can!" and "Change We Can Believe In!" were quintessential valence politics rallying cries that resonated with the desires of millions of voters to elect a president who would address the serious problems confronting the nation—someone who could and would "get the job done."

Obama's campaign organization worked assiduously to get these people to the polls. In particular, his campaign co-managers, "the two Davids"—Plouffe and Axelrod—built organizations that mobilized large numbers of African Americans and young people in Southern and Border States such as Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Missouri, and Tennessee, all of which George W. Bush had easily carried in 2004.

Nationally, turnout increased by only 1.5 percent in 2008 over 2004, but the composition of the active electorate was different than it had been four years earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Given that 2008 was a year when prevailing political-economic forces heavily favoured the Democrats, one might argue that Obama's main primary opponent, Senator Hillary Clinton, likely would have won if she had been her party's nominee. More speculatively, one might contend that the powerful triangulation of a deep economic crisis, a protracted, unresolved war, and a widely detested Republican president meant that virtually any Democratic candidate would have emerged victorious. To paraphrase the famous aphorism about pre-civil rights era southern politics, the Democrats could have run virtually anyone in 2008, including the storied "yellow dog," and still won (Key, 1949). Our analyses indicate the latter hypothesis is dubious; as is typical in presidential elections, partisanship had dynamic properties, sizable minorities made their decisions in the two months before polling day when the national campaigns were introducing the candidates to the mass electorate, and candidate images had very important effects on the choices voters made. However, the former hypothesis remains intriguing; Senator Clinton demonstrated that she was a formidable campaigner, one with the ability to defeat Obama in states where large numbers of Electoral College votes could be harvested. But, in the end, the "Clinton conjecture" is destined to be confined to the realm of commons room counterfactuals—it was another talented campaigner, Barack Hussein Obama, who prevailed in the primaries and then defeated his Republican rival in the general election. Obama was dealt a strong hand, and he played it well.

### Endnotes

1. The first question in the ANES identification battery is: “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?” The CCAP question, designed for internet surveys is similar and asks: “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself as a...” before offering the respondent the following choices: Republican, Democrat, Independent, Other, and Not Sure.
2. The CCAP questions tapping retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy are: “Would you say that *over the past year* [emphasis in original], the nation’s economy has...” and “What about over the next 12 months? Do you expect the economy, in the country as a whole, to...” The five response options range from: get/gotten much worse to get/gotten much better.
3. Respondents were asked “What is the most important problem facing the country today?” and were presented with a set of 18-21 pre-selected answer choices with an option to write in an issue that was not listed.
4. The Gallup party identification question is: “In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?”
5. The party supporter question is: “Some people think of themselves as usually being a supporter of one political party rather than another. Do you usually think of yourself as being a supporter of one particular party or not?” Those answering “yes” to the question were then asked: “Which party is that?” Choices included: Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green, Other, or Don’t Know.”
6. Time of vote decision is measured using the following question: “How long before the election did you decide to vote the way you did?” Respondents were given choices that included: a few days, a week or so, more than a week, around the time of the first presidential debate, my mind was made up before the conventions, and not sure.
7. CCAP respondents were asked how well the traits depicted in Figure 7 described the candidates. Respondents were able to choose: Extremely Well, Quite Well, Not Too Well, and Not Well at All. Don’t knows were coded to a midpoint value and higher scores on each of the variables were associated with positive feelings towards either Senator McCain or Senator Obama. For the multivariate analyses, the four trait variables were subjected to a principal components analysis (PCA), and factor scores were extracted for use as independent variables. The trait component for Senator Obama had an eigenvalue of 3.4 and explained 86% of the variance, and the trait component for Senator McCain had an eigenvalue of 2.7 and explained 68% of the variance. Emotional reactions to the candidates were summarized by summing the number of positive (hopeful, proud) and negative (angry, ashamed) reactions to each candidate the respondents made. Positive reactions were scored +1 and negative reactions were scored -1.



8. The four racial resentment questions asked on the CCAP derive from the Symbolic Racism 2000 scale developed by Henry and Sears (2002). See also Gomez and Wilson (2006); Kuklinski et al. (1997); Sniderman and Tetlock (1986); Tarman and Sears (2005). The questions we utilize in these analyses are from the October wave, but the questions were also asked in the March and September waves. Supplemental analyses (not shown) indicate that these attitudes were very stable over this time span. A PCA of the four racial resentment indicators extracted one component with an eigenvalue of 2.8 that explained 71% of the item variance. In the multivariate analyses, higher scores on this component indicated the respondent has *less* racial resentment. The ideology variables were scores extracted from a PCA of five issue positions tapping the respondents' attitudes towards taxes, gay marriage, abortion, government's responsibility to guarantee jobs, and liberal-conservative ideology. The first component extracted (eigenvalue 2.8 with 57% of the item variance explained) represented respondents' position on a social issue component while the second component (eigenvalue 0.91 with 18.2% of the item variance explained) represented positions on an economic issue factor. Higher scores on both indicated a more "conservative" or "right" position on the dimension.
9. The religiosity variable was a factor score extracted from a PCA of three indicators where the respondent answered their frequency of church attendance, how important they thought religion was to their daily lives, and the guidance religion provided them. The eigenvalue for the component was 1.8 with 61% of the variance explained.
10. The two issue-proximity variables are -1\*the absolute difference between the respondent's self-reported issue position and perceived positions of Senators Obama and McCain, respectively.
11. Correlations ( $r$ ) between the state-level percentages of African Americans and Hispanics, on the one hand, and the percentage change in turnout between 2004 and 2008, on the other, are +.63 and +.10, respectively. A state-level regression analysis of changes in turnout rates between 2004 and 2008 shows that controlling for level of party competition, the percentage of African American and the percentage of Hispanic residents both have positive, statistically significant effects on increased turnout across the two elections. Details are available upon request.

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Figure 1. CCAP and Actual Vote Shares, 2008 Presidential Election

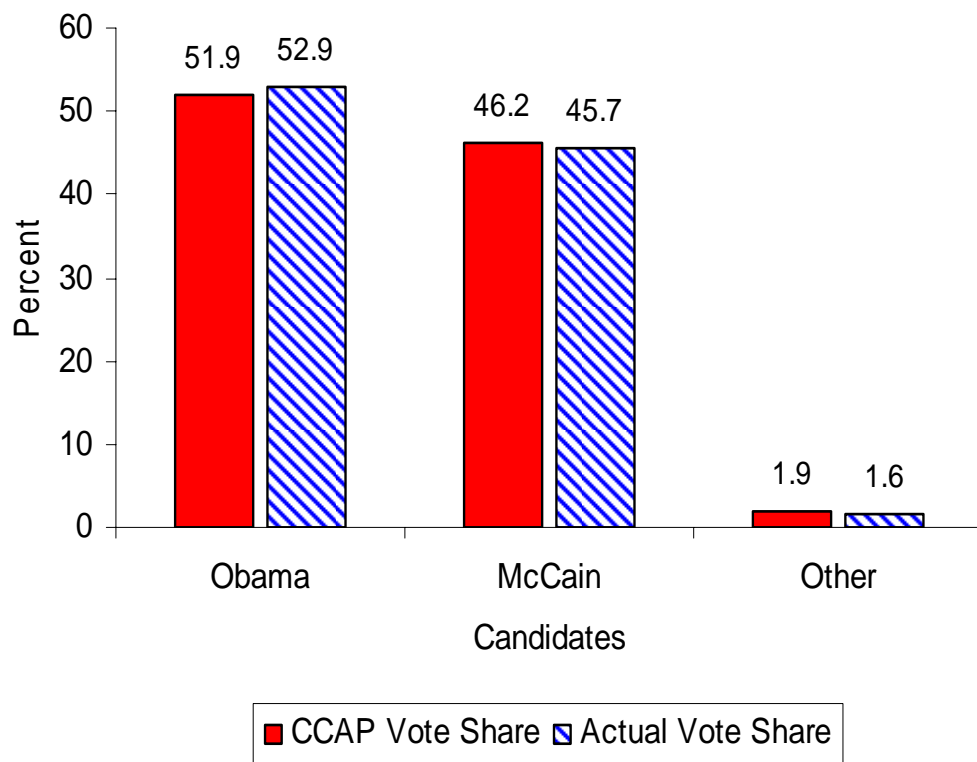


Figure 2. Party Identification, 2008 ANES and CCAP Surveys

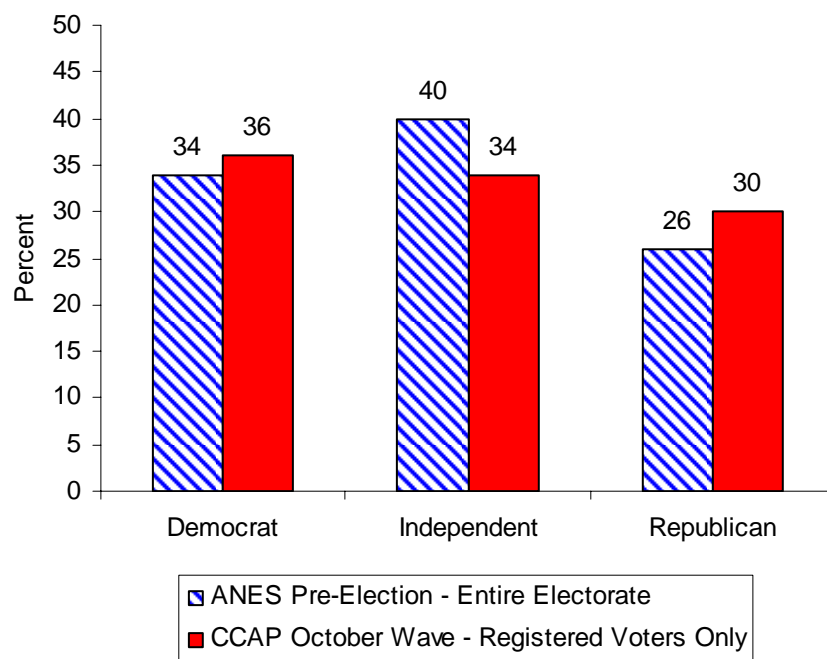


Figure 3. Retrospective Evaluations of the National Economy, December 2007 - November 2008

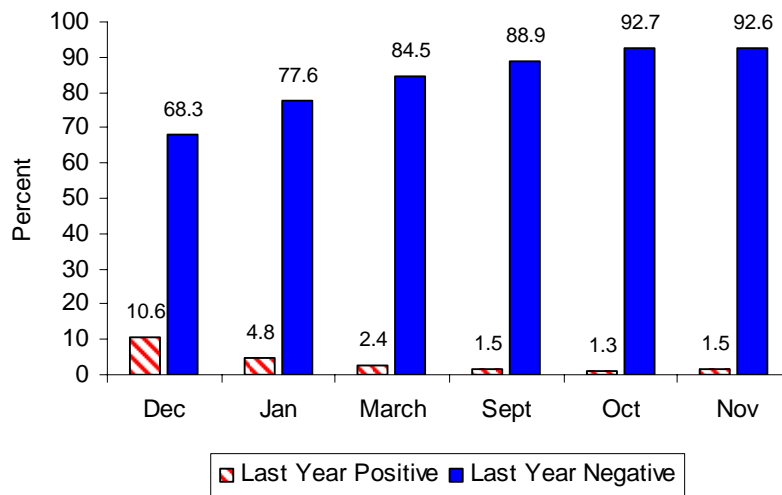


Figure 4. Index of Consumer Confidence, January 1999-January 2009

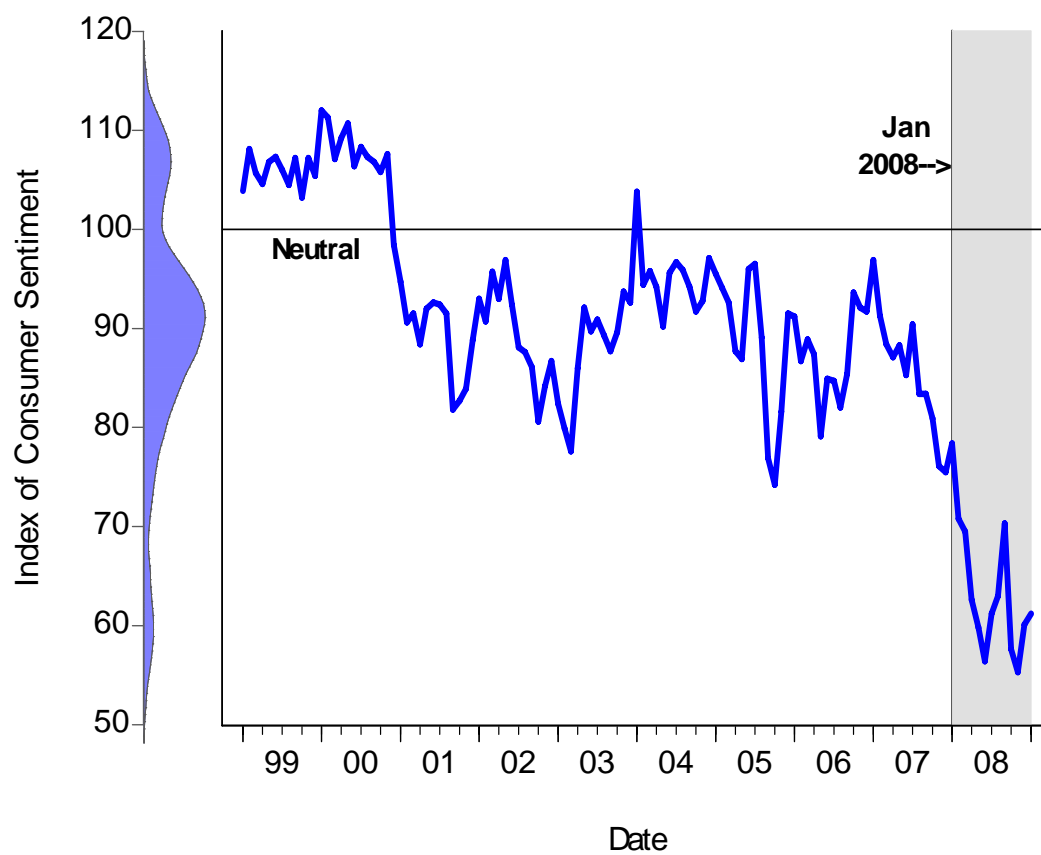




Figure 5. Most Important Issue Facing the County,  
December 2007-November 2008 CCAP Surveys

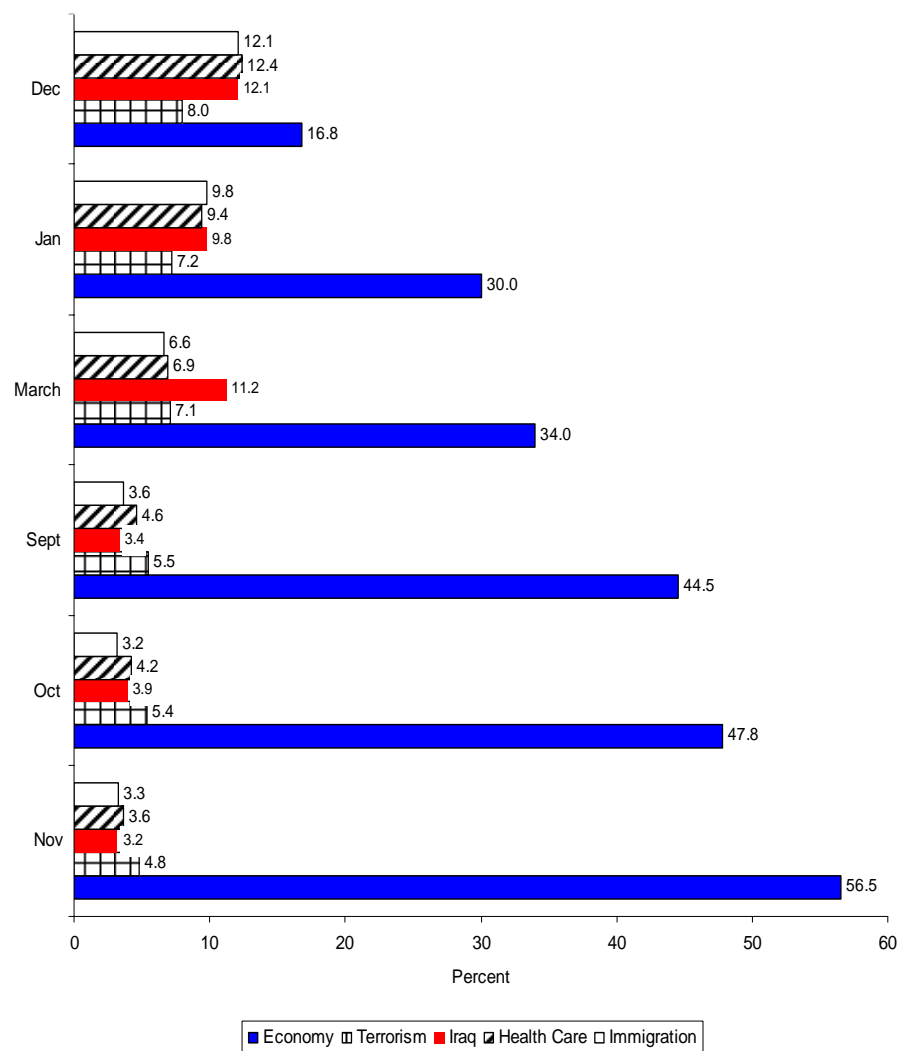


Figure 6. Party Best Able to Handle Most Important Issue, January 2008-November 2008 CCAP Surveys

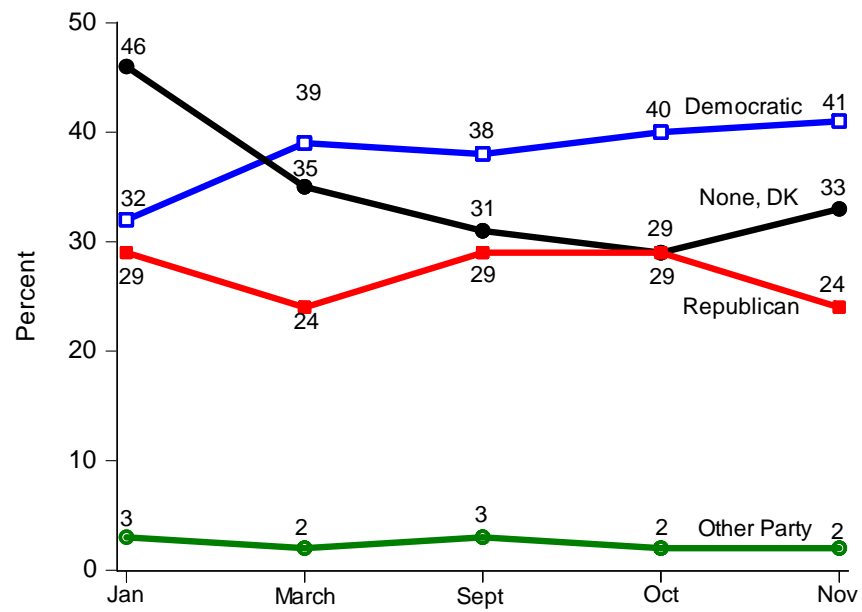


Figure 7. Dynamics of Party Identification, Traditional and Alternative Measures, December 2007-November 2008 CCAP Surveys

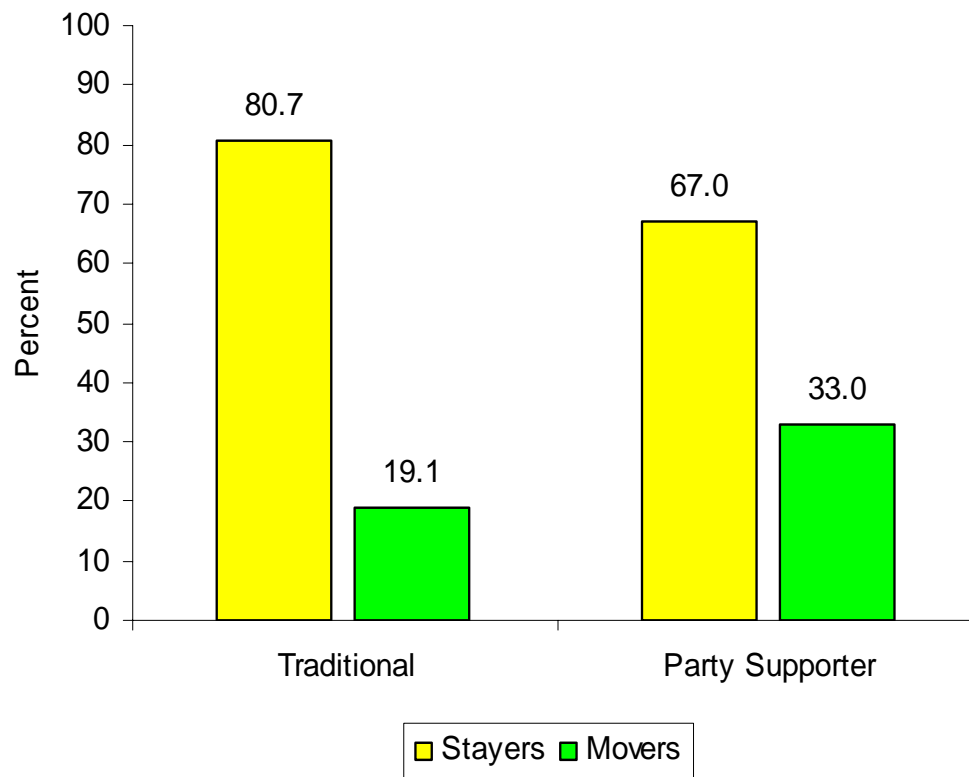


Figure 8. Presidential Candidates' Traits, October 2008 CCAP Survey

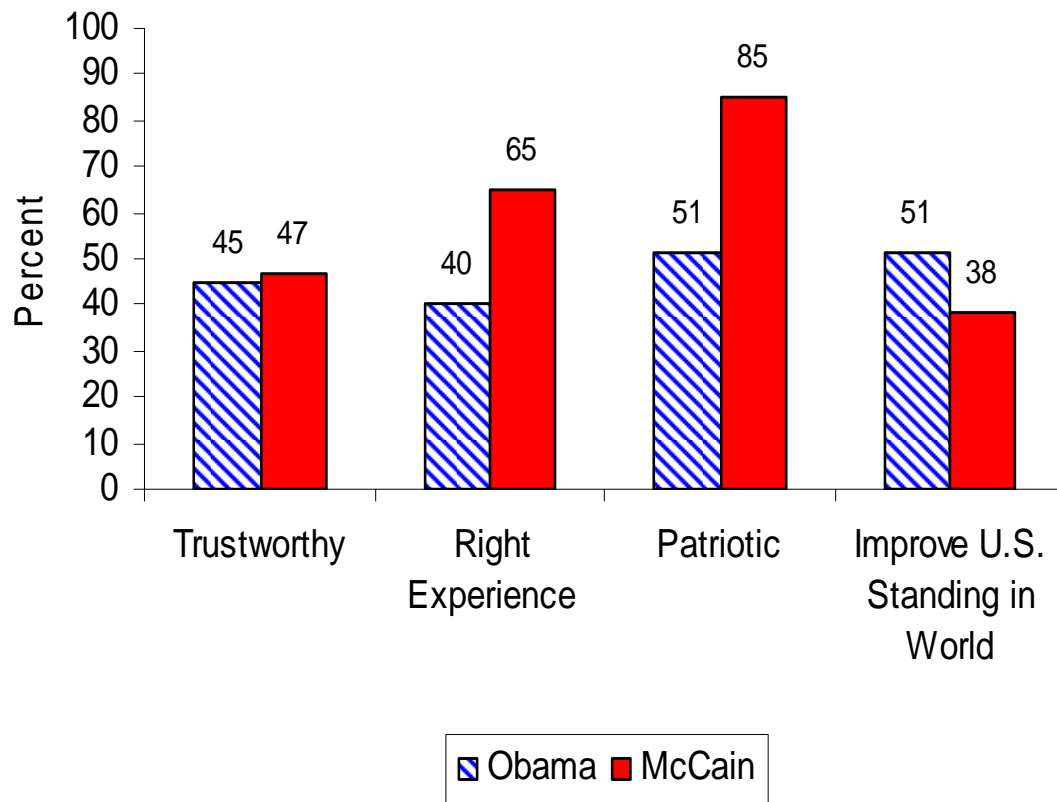


Figure 9. Emotional Reactions to Presidential Candidates,  
October 2008 CCAP Survey

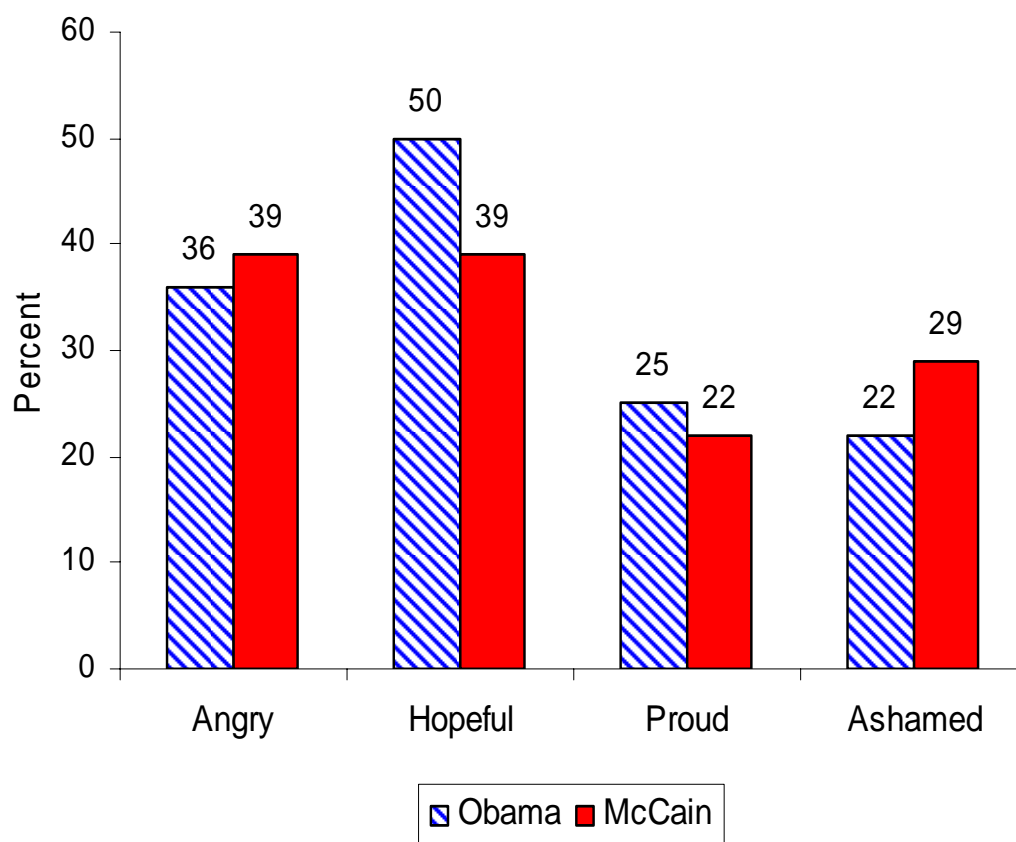


Figure 10. Changes in Probability of Voting for Obama Associated With Changes in the Values of Significant Predictor Variables in Composite Voting Model

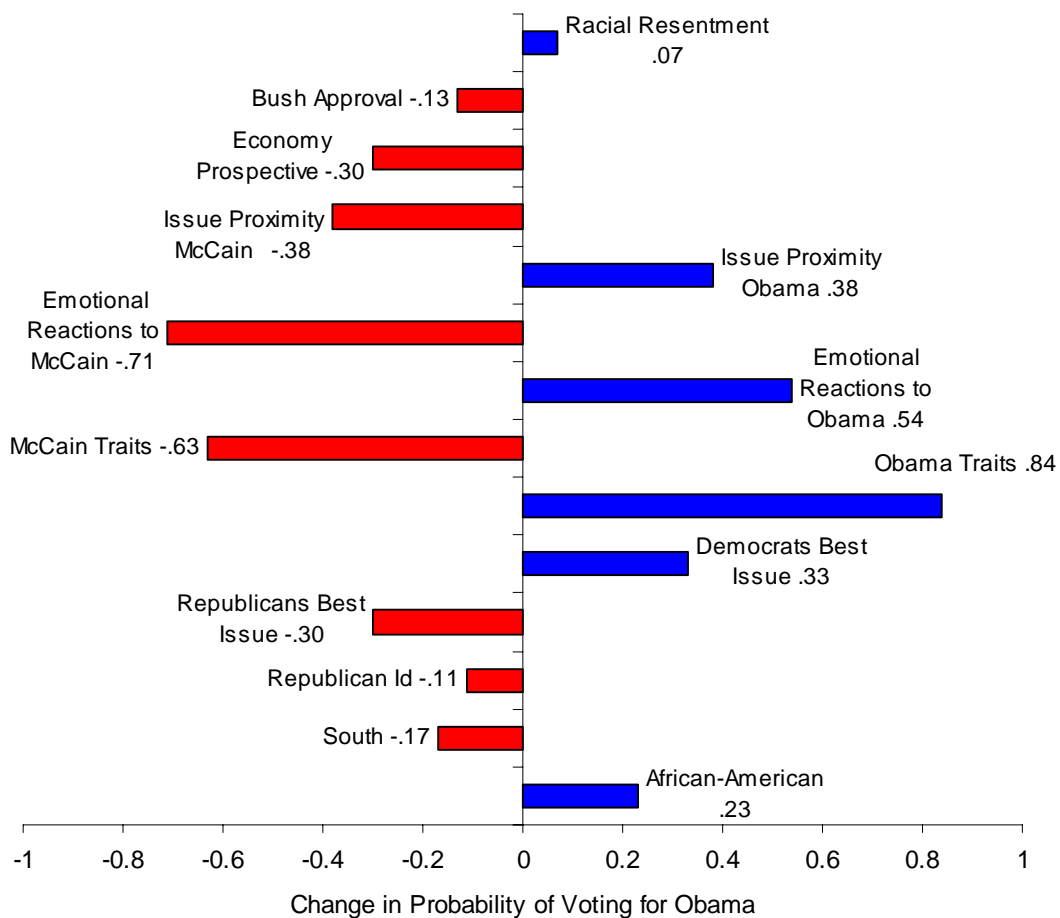


Table 1. Multiple Regression Analyses of Candidate Images

| <i>Predictor Variables</i> | Obama         | Obama           | McCain         | McCain          |
|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                            | <u>Traits</u> | <u>Emotions</u> | <u>Traits</u>  | <u>Emotions</u> |
|                            | $\beta$       | $\beta$         | $\beta$        | $\beta$         |
| <b>Racial Resentment</b>   | <b>.18***</b> | <b>.20***</b>   | <b>-.13***</b> | <b>-.17***</b>  |
| Ideology: Economic         | -.21***       | -.31***         | .16***         | .22***          |
| Social                     | -.18***       | -.24***         | .07***         | .20***          |
| Party Identification:      |               |                 |                |                 |
| Republican                 | -.05***       | -.12***         | .18***         | .17***          |
| Democrat                   | .05***        | .04*            | .01            | -.02            |
| Other                      | -.09*         | -.18***         | -.20***        | -.14*           |
| Party Best on Most         |               |                 |                |                 |
| Important Issue:           |               |                 |                |                 |
| Republican                 | -.34***       | -.60***         | .52***         | .53***          |
| Democrat                   | .76***        | .88***          | -.42***        | -.82***         |
| Other                      | -.14***       | -.33***         | -.42***        | -.42***         |
| Economic Evaluations:      |               |                 |                |                 |
| Retrospective              | .04***        | .04***          | .09***         | .07***          |
| Prospective                | -.02***       | -.03***         | .05***         | .08***          |
| Age                        | -.001***      | -.001***        | .001***        | .001**          |
| Education                  | .00           | -.00            | .02***         | -.02**          |
| Gender                     | .04***        | .01             | -.04***        | -.14***         |
| Income                     | .00           | -.00            | .01***         | .00             |
| Race/Ethnicity:            |               |                 |                |                 |
| African-American           | .22***        | .33***          | -.17***        | -.03            |
| Asian                      | -.00          | -.07            | -.05           | .06             |
| Hispanic                   | .06***        | .05             | -.08**         | -.01            |
| Other                      | -.04          | -.09*           | -.15***        | -.05            |
| Religion:                  |               |                 |                |                 |
| Protestant                 | .00           | .05             | .16**          | .07             |
| Roman Catholic             | .05           | .09             | .16            | .04             |
| Other                      | .02           | .07             | .08***         | -.02            |
| Religiosity                | -.01          | -.01            | .02***         | .03***          |
| Religiosity x Protestant   | .02           | .04             | -.02           | -.04            |
| Constant                   | -.22***       | .01             | -.32***        | .12             |
| R <sup>2</sup> =           | .75           | .68             | .53            | .61             |

\*\*\* -  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\* -  $p \leq .01$ ; \* -  $p \leq .05$ ; one-tailed test.

Table 2. Rival Models of Presidential Voting, 2008

| <i>Model</i>                                 | <u>McFadden<br/>R<sup>2</sup></u> | <u>McKelvey<br/>R<sup>2</sup></u> | <u>% Correctly<br/>Predicted</u> | <u>Akaike<br/>Criterion</u> |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Race/Ethnicity Only                       | .05                               | .12                               | 56.4                             | 13691.14                    |
| 2. All Socio-Demographics                    | .14                               | .26                               | 67.8                             | 12350.29                    |
| 3. Economic Evaluations                      | .09                               | .16                               | 67.7                             | 12927.65                    |
| 4. Racial Resentment                         | .31                               | .48                               | 77.5                             | 9796.89                     |
| 5. Party Identification                      | .39                               | .54                               | 79.8                             | 8676.52                     |
| 6. Ideological Proximity                     | .59                               | .80                               | 91.1                             | 4982.05                     |
| 7. Party Best on Issues                      | .60                               | .81                               | 88.1                             | 4844.30                     |
| 8. Candidate Traits                          | .69                               | .92                               | 95.9                             | 2353.10                     |
| 9. Candidate Traits &<br>Emotional Reactions | .70                               | .93                               | 96.4                             | 1902.29                     |
| 10. Valence Politics†                        | .87                               | .93                               | 96.8                             | 1855.06                     |
| 11. Composite Model‡                         | .89                               | .94                               | 97.3                             | 1564.48                     |

† - includes party identification, party best on most important issue, candidate traits and emotional reactions to candidates.

‡ - includes all predictor variables from models 1-9, plus Bush approval/disapproval.

Note: binomial logit models, Obama v. McCain.



Table 3. Composite Binomial Logit Model of Voting for Barack Obama  
in the 2008 Presidential Election

| <i>Predictor Variables</i>                  | $\beta$   | s.e.  |
|---|-----------|-------|
| Candidate Traits: Obama                     | 1.886***  | 0.151 |
| McCain                                      | -0.925*** | 0.120 |
| Emotional Reactions to Candidates: Obama    | 0.631***  | 0.090 |
| McCain                                      | -0.914*** | 0.084 |
| Party Best Most Important Issue: Democratic | 1.723***  | 0.215 |
| Republican                                  | -1.347*** | 0.255 |
| Other Party                                 | -0.461    | 0.395 |
| Issue Proximity: Obama                      | 0.415***  | 0.078 |
| McCain                                      | -0.466*** | 0.093 |
| Party Identification: Democratic            | 0.130     | 0.180 |
| Republican                                  | -0.457**  | 0.190 |
| Other Party                                 | -0.328    | 0.585 |
| Economic Evaluations: Retrospective         | -0.195    | 0.760 |
| Prospective                                 | -0.187**  | 0.075 |
| Bush Performance: Approval/Disapproval      | -0.270*   | 0.127 |
| Racial Resentment                           | 0.230**   | 0.093 |
| Age   | -0.007    | 0.005 |
| Education                                   | -0.008    | 0.051 |
| Gender                                      | -0.187    | 0.147 |
| Income                                      | 0.032     | 0.022 |
| Race/Ethnicity: African American            | 1.106***  | 0.300 |
| Asian                                       | 0.638     | 0.516 |
| Hispanic                                    | 0.421     | 0.310 |
| Other                                       | 0.283     | 0.509 |
| Region: North East                          | 0.150     | 0.199 |
| South                                       | -0.695*** | 0.177 |
| West  | -0.070    | 0.216 |
| Religion: Protestant                        | -0.791    | 0.506 |
| Catholic                                    | -0.828    | 0.510 |
| Other                                       | -0.739    | 0.495 |
| Religiosity                                 | -0.019    | 0.077 |
| Constant                                    | 1.305*    | 0.591 |

Model Log Likelihood = -751.24, Likelihood Ratio  $\chi^2 = 12769.34$ ,  $p < .001$

McFadden  $R^2 = .89$

McKelvey  $R^2 = .94$

Percent Correctly Classified = 97.3

Proportionate Reduction in Error (Lambda) = .94

\*\*\* -  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\* -  $p \leq .01$ ; \* -  $p \leq .05$ , one-tailed test.