

Just How Important is Personality in Presidential Elections?

☒ Over the past few months, a number of political analysts have presented multiple economic statistics suggesting the historical infeasibility of President Obama winning a second term. In a nutshell, it's pretty much unprecedented for an incumbent president ending his third year in office with this high of an unemployment rate and this low of an economic growth rate to achieve re-election.

While that information may be interesting, I certainly don't put a lot of stock in it. Being that our country enjoyed a strong economy for the better part of the last three decades, prior to the 2008 meltdown, those statistics haven't been applicable to elections since Ronald Reagan took office. Therefore, I suspect that the traditional predictors of voter behavior are probably a bit outdated.

The country, after all, has changed a lot over the past thirty years. We've evolved into a media-driven era of ever-shrinking attention spans and a relentless need to keep ourselves entertained. We enjoy public spectacles, prefer style over substance, and are regularly being bombarded with dueling ideological viewpoints that are too often misrepresented as fact. It stands to reason that with such cultural change comes an alteration in how we evaluate our presidential candidates.

When I look back at the presidential elections from the last thirty years, I do notice a certain consistency, but not one supported by mathematical statistics. The pattern I see is that the general election candidate with the most appealing personality has always won. I don't see a single exception.

Think about it for a moment. Completely disregard all of the

candidates' individual backgrounds and platforms, as well as the state of the country on election day, and just compare their personalities... Am I wrong?

Stuffy individuals like Walter Mondale, Al Gore, and John Kerry all exuded competence and carried impressive credentials, but they lacked the personable nature of their counterparts. Candidates like George H.W. Bush, Bob Dole and John McCain all came across as genuine and thoughtful. They had impressive resumes, and were war heroes to boot, but they lacked the spryness and natural charisma of their opponents.

Now, I'm not going to suggest that the majority of voters select candidates without any regard to substantive experience, achievements, and visions, but I do tend to believe that personalities play a far larger role in the outcome of modern day elections than most people realize.

Former George W. Bush adviser Karl Rove has made the point on numerous occasions that his boss reasonably "shouldn't have won" the 2000 election. The Clinton/Gore administration left office with the country in a state of peace and prosperity. It would have stood to reason that the electorate would have chosen to *stick with what worked* and elect Vice President Al Gore like they did with George H.W. Bush following the Reagan administration. Yet, Gore was so personally unappealing and boorish that he lost many potential supporters to his charming and energetic, underdog opponent. Ultimately, I believe it was that alone that made the difference in a race that was much tighter than anyone expected it to be.

The same could be said about the 2004 election. By election day, Bush's popularity rating was teetering on 50%, the Iraq war was extremely unpopular, and the Democratic party was united. With the inclusion of 527 groups, the Democrats outspent the Republicans by \$124 million during the campaign. Yet, Independents just couldn't quite get excited about John Kerry. The consensus seemed to be that Kerry had beaten Bush

in all three presidential debates, but in my opinion, he was just so drab and uncharismatic that he couldn't seal the deal with the electorate.

On the other side of the aisle, George H.W. Bush's first term in office seemed to be a fairly successful one. He presided over the fall of the Berlin Wall and successful military operations in Panama and the Persian Gulf. By election day, the economy had recovered from a mild recession. Yet, there was undeniable star quality in a saxophone-playing governor from Arkansas that charmed the voters away.

We all know how well Barack Obama's *cult of personality* has served him. Granted, the Republican Party had a substantial deficit in public support by 2008, but on paper, a junior senator with no leadership experience or legislative achievements should have been a tough sell to the American public... even with a historic candidacy and unprecedented support from the news media. Had Obama not had his glowing personality, million dollar smile, and infectious charm to gloss over his shortcomings and a stiff opponent, a Republican victory would have certainly been possible.

I don't think personality is as major a factor in primary elections. After all, those most passionate in the political process take their obligations more seriously than the non-ideological voter. But the general election is an entirely different landscape. Candidates are playing to a lot of voters who simply don't follow the issues and current events all that closely. Many look to the general election debates to see who's the better showman and who they find more personally appealing.

Now, I know I'm not drawing any groundbreaking conclusion here. The idea that charisma and likability are assets in a campaign is something every political observer has recognized for generations. But 2012 is really going to be a testimonial to just *how* important personality is to us as voters. On paper

and barring any dramatic events, there's no way that Obama should win a second term. The country's an absolute mess. Mitt Romney will most likely be the Republican candidate. If that's the case, it will be the *Charmer in Chief* versus the *Disciplined Professional*. Both men are strong, articulate speakers and debaters. Both will come highly prepared. Yet, one can't deny that Obama has a distinct advantage in the personality department. Despite our president's known reliance on teleprompters, he actually comes across as the least scripted of the two. Even Romney's laugh seems carefully rehearsed, and voters will notice that.

2012 will be a landmark election. Voters will be making big choice on how we'll move forward as a nation. But I suspect we'll also determine in 2012 just how superficial we've become as an electorate.