

Insiders, Outsiders, and Voters in The 2008 U. S. Presidential Election

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In 2008, both Barack Obama and John McCain repeatedly talked about “reform” and “change” on the campaign trail, presumably believing that voters would respond to a president that could challenge the established way of doing business. We seek to gauge the significance of “reform” politics in 2008 through two analyses. First, we estimate a two-dimensional issue space, paying particular attention to the possibility of a reform/establishment dimension. Second, we gauge whether people (1) preferred reform candidates, and (2) saw Obama or McCain as credible reform candidates. The data indicate that existence of a reform-establishment dimension. However, neither Obama nor McCain effectively convinced voters that they were reformers.

Introduction

“[I]f you believe it's time to challenge the Washington politics ... to restore a sense of mission to our politics and a sense of possibility to America ... I ask you to believe in yourself, I ask you to believe again in the dream that we call America.”—Barack Obama¹

“In New Orleans, McCain said the word “change” or a variation of it more than 30 times in his speech—a sign that he knows what voters are looking for.”—Holly Bailey²

We have all been told that the 2008 presidential election was historic; not merely a consequential election, but a monumental moment in American history. This may, in fact, prove to be true. But in many ways, the 2008 presidential election was both predictable and quite comparable with a handful of past races. Consider that the 2008 election featured an incumbent party seeking a third consecutive presidential victory, but burdened by a costly war, a sagging economy, and an unpopular president. The elections of 1952 and 1968—both of which produced a change in party control of the White House—were surely relevant touchstones. Both Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon pounded the incumbent administrations for their incompetence and malfeasance during their election campaigns, while promising to bring needed change and outside the beltway sensibilities to Washington. Like those candidates, Barack Obama had a huge advantage and a clear path to the goal-line in 2008. John McCain, on the other hand, needed to convince voters that a GOP victory in 2008 wouldn’t constitute a “third term” for President Bush.

Because of these circumstances, both presidential campaigns attempted to capture the mantle of “reform.” Their core strategic assumption was abundantly clear: a candidate who could tap into voters’ frustration with the policies and politics of the last few years could expect a substantial electoral bonanza. The most obvious manifestation

of this belief is that much of the rhetoric of the 2008 presidential campaign involved words such as “change,” “reform,” “outsider,” and “maverick.”

But the truth is that we don’t know very much about the electoral implications of being a “change” candidate in the U.S. There is almost no empirical research on whether voters consider “outsider” candidates as better than “insider” candidates, or whether this particular distinction is even relevant to their political calculus. More specifically, there has been no systematic study of how the notion of “reform” politics played out in the 2008 presidential election.

This study takes aim at this gap. We proceed in a straightforward manner. Initially, we propose using insights and assumptions from spatial theory to consider the nature of competition in U.S. presidential elections. Second, we examine data from the National Election Study (NES) from 1992-2004 to determine the number and character of dimensions structuring voters’ perceptions of presidential candidates in those years. Third, we apply the same approach with data from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to consider the possibility of a reform-establishment dimension in the Obama-McCain contest. Fourth, we use post-election survey data from the University of Texas at Austin’s Government Department polls to more precisely estimate (1) the distribution of voters along a reform-establishment dimension, (2) their perception of where the candidates and parties fall along this dimension, and (3) the impact of these perceptions on presidential vote choice. Fifth and finally, we speculate

about the pervasiveness and components of reform sentiments in future U.S. elections and policy debates.

The Dimensions of Political Competition

In studying the potential role of reformist sentiment and candidates in 2008, we assume that voters and candidates are rational actors who attempt to maximize their utility when deciding for whom to vote.³ Beyond assuming a general rationality among voters, we also assume that voters will tend to support candidates who credibly articulate positions on salient issues (or issue dimensions) that are closest to their own positions. It is this assumption that gives rise to the concept of political dimensions and dimensional space. The idea of political dimensionality is obviously well-established in the voting literature. Most notably there is the work of Downs, who crystallized two ideas related to the space of political competition. First, he contends that parties and candidates locate themselves in an issue space to maximize their prospects for success (usually defined as electoral victory and control over the political process). Second, Downs postulates that this issue space is typically defined by opinions on the scope of government involvement in the economy. Taken together, these ideas have produced enormous literatures on proximity voting (see Kedar 2003 for a review), candidate and party positioning strategies (see Adams and Merrill 2008 for a review), and candidate and party ambiguity (see Alvarez 1997 for a review).

A slightly less voluminous literature has focused on the possibility and nature of multidimensional political competition, both in electorates (Enelow and Hinich 1984; Inglehart 1977; Petrocik 1981) and in legislatures (McCubbins and Cox 1993; Poole, Rosenthal, and Koford 1991). Of the two, research into electoral behavior has been less common, more difficult, and more controversial. Many studies have attempted to specify the existence and nature of prospective second or third dimensions (e.g., Enelow and Hinich 1984; Inglehart 1977 and 1990; Shafer and Claggett 1995; Myagkov and Ordeshook 1999), but few have offered a satisfactory methodological platform and been generalizable beyond a given point in time.

This last observation merits elaboration. Consistent with Downs's aforementioned second idea, all dimensional studies of American elections that we know of either find or assume a dominant left-right dimension. That is, voters see candidates as more or less liberal (favoring a more substantial role for government in addressing economic issues) or conservative (favoring a more limited role for government and preferring private sector and market-based solutions). Moreover, voters seem to support major party candidates who are closer to themselves on these sorts of issues.

A great many studies also find a second dimension to electoral competition in the U.S. The exact nature of this second dimension, however, is a matter of significant controversy. Perhaps the most common argument is that voters are moved by values issues—such as abortion, the death penalty, and gay

marriage. The idea that values issues constitute a second dimension in American politics has its roots in analyses of shifts in the Democrats' New Deal coalition; many have observed that questions of race, religion, and social order prompted white southern Democrats to move away from their party, while New England and California Republicans moved away from their party (Petrocik 1981; Steeper 1995; Aldrich 1995; Black and Black 2002). Issue-based accounts of contemporary party dynamics have also focused on this constellation of issues and attendant coalitional changes (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Shafer and Claggett 1995).

But other perspectives exist. Drawing on extensive analyses of political dynamics in Europe in the 1970s and 80s, some believe that post-materialist issues—such as the environment, women's rights, and de-militarization—animate political competition in the U.S. during times of economic affluence (see Inglehart 1977, 1990). There are also those who believe that foreign policy issues—such as the scope of international engagement, free and fair trade, and (most importantly) military commitments abroad—constitute an electoral dimension with internationalists on one side and isolationists on the other (Brady 1989; Chittick, Billingsley, and Travis 1995). Nevertheless, while many have picked up on the notion that the liberal-conservative divide of New Deal politics has been cross-cut by at least one other issue dimension, few have specified the

nature of this second dimension and even fewer have devised and executed plausible empirical tests of its existence and power.

A Reform Dimension

We join in the belief that recent elections in the U.S. are characterized by at least two dimensions. Our particular understanding of its character is, however, slightly different. In addition to a left-right dimension, we argue that voters also see politics in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders.” That is, some candidates—and presumably some issue approaches—are seen as representing the established political order. This established political order is located in Washington, D.C. and is characterized by some positive (experienced, knowledgeable) and many negative (corruption, incompetent) characteristics. On the other side of the ledger, some candidates and issue approaches are seen as representing a challenge to the entrenched power structure. These tend to come from outside the Beltway, and champion reforming the political order, instituting “common-sense” solutions, and doing away with “politics as usual.” Again, reform candidates have some positive (freshness, in touch with the people) and some negative (inexperienced, naïve) characteristics.

This perspective draws heavily on both elections in other countries and an anecdotal overview of recent elections in the U.S. A cursory overview of the last decade’s worth of elections in Europe suggests that victories by the conservative

parties in France and Germany, along with the rise of right-wing politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Joerg Haider in Austria, and Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands signals popular sentiment for reigning in extensive state spending and progressive social policies across the continent. But one might also reasonably conclude that conservative candidates have reaped the electoral benefit of a pro-outsider, reformist backlash against the perceived incompetence and corruption of entrenched, left-of-center governing majorities. Similarly, we hesitate to characterize the successes of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil as manifestations of a sharp, left-ward turn in the politics of South America; rather, it seems more likely that these candidates rode populist rhetoric against the abuses of established right-wing politicians and parties to election triumphs in their respective countries.

In fact, the rise of truly competitive, democratic competition in Mexico, Japan, India, Turkey, Ukraine, Chile, and several other countries is almost certainly attributable to the rise of “reformist” parties aimed at exploiting popular discontent with entrenched interests and a one-party political monopoly. Let us be clear—we are not saying that those who rise to power championing reform do not sometimes transform existing grievances into leftist or right-wing terms. We are saying that those who see the success of these challenger parties in purely left-right terms almost assuredly misapprehend the true nature of popular sentiment animating competition in these countries.

In the U.S., at least two recent presidential elections appear to have been influenced by reformist impulses: 1992 and 2000. In 1992, the recession of 1991-92 and the perception that the incumbent George H.W. Bush administration was “out of touch” fueled the candidacies of both then-Arkansas governor Bill Clinton and, even more obviously, Texas billionaire Ross Perot. Perot’s signature issue—the budget deficit—was a powerful expression of the sentiment that the federal government was incompetent; too incompetent, in fact, to balance its own checkbook. In 2000, partisan bickering and the campaign finance scandals of the 1996 campaign breathed life into the nascent candidacies of Arizona senator John McCain and consumer advocate Ralph Nader. McCain’s signature issue—campaign finance reform—was a powerful expression of the sentiment that federal candidates were corrupt; bought and sold by special interest money. Beyond these presidential contests, one could also make the case that the 1994 and 2006 congressional elections saw an insider-outsider (reform-establishment) dimension, with the majority party being ousted in each case.

It seems to us that 2008 might also have seen reform versus establishment sentiment. The public had clearly turned against the George W. Bush administration for its handling of the war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, and (ultimately) the economy. The Obama campaign staked its claim to mantle of “change” very early in the campaign, using it even in the nomination struggle against Hillary Clinton. The McCain campaign, desperate not to be saddled with

the unpopular president, attempted to re-claim the “maverick” label their candidate had worn so naturally assumed in 2000. Given the outcome, it is even tempting to presuppose that Obama was *successful* in convincing voters that he was the true reform candidate in this election.

But 2008 is also like 1992 and 2000 in that we don’t really know whether voters saw the election in terms of an establishment candidate versus a reform candidate. Pundits and consultants have some theories and an impressionistic sense of what happened...but very little data and hard analysis. The remainder of this paper tests the propositions that (1) a reform-establishment dimension exists in the U.S.; (2) voters found it relevant to their conception of politics in 2008; and (3) Obama or McCain more effectively exploited it in 2008.

Identifying Dimensions to Electoral Competition

At this point, it is important to define a methodology for determining political space and to apply it to recent presidential elections. In particular, our immediate goal is to articulate a means for determining the relevant issue dimensions of electoral competition. As suggested above, since the pioneering work in the 1960s many spatial models have attempted to account for electoral competition in a multidimensional setting. What is striking, however, is the lack of consensus over (1) how to specify dimensions beyond the simple left-right continuum,⁴ and (2) the nature of the second dimension.

The linkage model of Hinich and Munger (1994) is an important component of our approach. Let θ_p denote the policy position of candidate p in an m -dimensional policy space. The algebra of the linear linkage is as follows: $\theta_p = \pi_p \mathbf{v}$ where π_p is the latent position of candidate p in the ideology space and \mathbf{v} is an m -dimensional vector linking the policy and the latent ideology space. The linear linkage between policy spaces and the latent ideology space for quadratic preferences results in an induced quadratic preference for parties located in the political space. This is true for any multidimensional policy space and a two-dimensional latent ideology space as well as a one-dimensional ideology space.

This important mathematical result makes it possible to determine the political space using existing statistical methods and public opinion data that fit the contours of the spatial theory of electoral competition.⁵ The statistical method is called *MAP* developed by Cahoon and Hinich (1976) and modified by Hinich (2006). *MAP* allows users to learn the nature of the political space and its linkage with critical issues and track changes of the space over time. The underlying logic is straightforward: the induced preference model in the political space for each voter is also a quadratic model with a party competence term.⁶ Given a one-dimensional political space, voter v 's induced utility for party p 's ideological position θ_p is $U_v(\pi_p, \mathbf{x}_v) = \beta c_{vp} - (\xi_v - z_v)^2$, where ξ_v is v 's induced ideal position in the ideology space. The term c_{vp} is voter v 's assessment of the competence and integrity of party p that has the power to attempt to enact policy θ_p . The parameter β is the weighting of the candidate competence term relative to the weighted

Euclidean distance term. Voter v prefers party p to party q if and only if $U_v(\boldsymbol{\theta}_p, \mathbf{x}_v) > U_v(\boldsymbol{\theta}_q, \mathbf{x}_v)$.

The Cahoon-Hinich (1976) methodology uses candidate evaluation scores to estimate a Euclidean representation of political space in a given election. Specifically, the methodology assumes that each voter's evaluation of the second candidate (candidate 2), T_{i2} , is inversely related to the spatial distance between the voter and candidate and may be written $T_{i2} = -|\mathbf{B}_2 - \mathbf{Z}_i| + e_{i2}$, where \mathbf{B}_2 and \mathbf{Z}_i are, respectively, candidate 2's and voter i 's location in the underlying space and e_{i2} represents unmeasurable, non-systemic influences on T_{i2} . The methodology estimates \mathbf{B}_2 by calculating a factor analysis of the covariance matrix from the evaluation scores. To do this, the scores (T_{i2}) must first be transformed so T_{i2} have linear relationships with \mathbf{B}_2 and \mathbf{Z}_i . This is accomplished in a two-step process. First, one candidate's average scores, T_{io} , are subtracted from the others. Then T_{io} 's mean score is subtracted from the first difference between each candidate's average score. The selection of the candidate whose scores are to be selected is mathematically arbitrary, but interpreting and comparing the maps is easier if one candidate represents the status quo and is the same in each map. The factor analysis of the covariance matrix from these adjusted scores produces, up to an arbitrary rotation, an initial estimate of candidate locations in the underlying space. We then perform two-stage least squares regressions to estimate the remaining parameters of the model including the angle of rotation of the candidate positions. Finally, voter locations are estimated in a separate regression with the dependent variable $(T_{i2} - T_{io})$, where the right

hand side of this equation includes the estimated B_2 . In evaluating the estimated maps, the proportion of explained variance from the two regressions should be quite high. As a rough measuring stick, the coefficient of determination, R^2 , in the second of these regressions ought to exceed 0.50, which would indicate the scaling solutions are correct. For all subsequent analyses, this criterion is met.

Previous studies applying the spatial model to political competition have largely limited themselves to a single election from a single country (Ghobarah 1998). Although we cannot offer across time analyses of multiple countries, we can look at U. S. presidential elections over the past five cycles. In particular, we examine how major political figures are perceived and evaluated during the 2008 presidential election, comparing to the recent trend of the political competition since 1992. The inclusion of multiple elections in our analysis enhances our ability to disentangle the general structure of American politics and competition and to comment on whatever dynamic exists with respect to candidate and party positioning. Did Obama and McCain recognize the latent dimensions of political competition in the U.S., and formulate their campaign messages and strategies based upon these dimensions? Did Obama and McCain successfully grasp their advantage points on the issues along the second dimension, in addition to the classic liberal-conservative cleavage?

Data and Design

To estimate political space, we use the 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 National Election Study (NES), and the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) surveys, which include items asking for respondents' thermometer ratings of public figures, as well as issue placement questions. The NES data include both pre- and post-election interviews—most via face-to-face questioning, some via telephone—with the total number of cases ranging from a high of 2,458 (1992) to a low of 1,204 (2000). The CCES data set is even more substantial, encompassing approximately 33,000 pre- and post-election interviews. Unlike NES, CCES respondents are selected via “matching” processes and complete their interviews online. But both the NES and CCES espouse sampling methodologies that ought to provide high quality, representative national samples. The thermometer ratings allow us to gauge evaluations of different political players and, as suggested earlier, can be used to define the relevant political space. These ratings range from 0-100—higher numbers indicate “warmer” feelings towards that person and lower numbers indicate “colder” feelings. A rating of 50 implies feelings towards that person are neutral. Responses indicating a lack of familiarity with the person are treated as missing data. As suggested above, these data sets also include a variety of issue items, which are important for the calculation of the *MAP* estimates of political space.⁷ In the interest of parsimony, we do not present the results of the issue items or subsequent ideal point analyses; rather, we concentrate on the graphs of political figures themselves, focusing on the positions they occupy in political space. Still, it is

worth pointing out that the NES and CCES data offer excellent candidate and issue measures given our underlying models and clearly meet our methodological needs.⁸

In addition to estimating the dimensions of political competition in recent presidential elections—including 2008—we also wish to explore specific impressions voters had about insiders and outsiders in 2008. Towards this end, we rely on CCES national survey data from 2006 and (more importantly) statewide data from the University of Texas’s Government Department Poll (UT Gov Poll). Initially, we look at a 1,000 person national survey conducted through the CCES in 2006 at the behest of the University of Texas. This survey contained items asking people about the extent of federal government corruption and incompetence, as well as a measure of their preference for an outsider versus an insider for president in 2006.

In early 2009 (February and May), two post-election surveys were conducted by the University of Texas with measures germane to our study. Both of the UT Gov polls were random-sample surveys of 1,000 adult Texans. The surveys were conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix and were completed online by respondents. Each included items asking voters to rate where they would like a candidate to fall on a 1-7 scale, with insider, establishment credentials occupying the 1 end of the scale and outsider, reformer credentials falling on the 7 end of the scale. We also asked respondents to tell us where they thought Obama, McCain, and several other political figures fell on this scale. Finally, we asked both real and hypothetical election questions. The “real” match-up asked them who they voted for in 2008, while the “hypothetical” match-up asked them to

choose between an insider and an outsider candidate. The use of two-sided frames—designed to offer respondents a balanced choice between insider and outsider perspectives—should give us leverage over the question of the distribution of voters along a prospective reform-establishment dimension. What’s more, asking voters to place the candidates along this continuum should give us insight into how well Obama and McCain played the reform card in 2008. Finally, allowing reform ratings—of individuals and of individuals relative to candidates—to predict vote choice should shed light on whether this issue was a factor in Obama’s victory.

Results

Political Space in Presidential Elections, 1992-2004

Figures 1-4 present the *MAP* estimates of the positions of the candidates and parties in a theoretical two-dimensional political space based on the thermometer ratings from the 1992-2004 elections. A critical point to make at the outset is that the results indicate a two-dimensional political space across four consecutive presidential elections in the U.S. This validates the work on the 1976 and 1980 elections by Enelow and Hinich (1984). The median ideal point analysis (not included) demonstrate that social welfare, defense, and race attitudes largely load on the same dimension, but that even on these issues there is additional, structured variance that cannot be accounted for. The candidate maps make this point with plain visuals, as they are not inherently constrained to some accumulation of issue positions. In both instances, the horizontal axis clearly

represents the traditional New Deal party system divide, with those preferring greater government involvement in the economy and social welfare (left) squaring off against those preferring less government involvement (right). The vertical axis also discriminates between and amongst the most prominent political figures and parties in the U.S., but—as stated earlier—the basis of this discrimination is not obvious at first glance for each year.

[Figures 1-4 about here]

In the absence of direct answers, we follow the example of Arthur Conan Doyle and his super-sleuth, Sherlock Holmes: a process of elimination can be used to shed considerable light on what we are dealing with here. First, we can state that figures 1-4 do not conform to the notion that foreign policy or defense issues are a latent dimension structuring political competition in the U. S. In 1996, for example, the vertical distances between Steve Forbes, Lamar Alexander, and Colin Powell (on the one hand) and Robert Dole and Newt Gingrich (on the other hand) are far more significant than one would expect if foreign policy or defense issues were lurking in the background of voters' minds. Similar incongruities exist in the other years.

Perhaps more plausible are the handful of projects which argue that traditional, social issues constitute a second dimension to American political competition. Unfortunately, this possibility is not borne out by the data. If social issues were driving the vertical distance between and amongst candidates and parties, one would certainly not see Pat Robertson (Founder and Chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network)

loading close to Hillary Clinton in 1996, for example. Nor would we expect Hillary Clinton to load close to Dan Quayle in 1992. The data are similarly inconsistent with the idea that post-materialist issues drive the second dimension.

What about the possibility of a reform-establishment (insider-outsider) dimension? By and large, the evidence is supportive. In 2004, we see that the vertical dimension discriminates between establishment powers such as George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and the Clintons, and maverick figures such as John McCain, Colin Powell, and Ralph Nader. However, the positions of John Edwards and, even more surprisingly, John Kerry, seem to work against the argument that the second dimension is animated by reform-establishment impulses. We would agree with those who argue that the ideological space for 2004 is complicated, but traces of the reform-establishment dimension are clearly present. Moreover, in the case of Edwards, the notion that he was perceived as someone operating outside the traditional Washington establishment is plausible; his “Two Americas” rhetoric can certainly be seen as reformist. A similar, albeit strained, case can be made for Kerry; his personal story was generally much better-known than his Senate record, and the particulars of his war hero-turned protestor biography makes us at least open to the possibility that he was perceived as a reform candidate.⁹

In 2000, we lose some purchase on the question at hand by using John McCain as our pivot point, but we are still able to see that figures such as Ralph Nader, Bill Bradley, and (in yet another reinvention) Pat Buchanan are clearly distinct from the major parties

and their candidates. Buchanan's position is actually quite expected given that he bolted from the GOP in the fall of 1999 and ran as the Reform Party's presidential candidate. Bill Clinton's involvement with scandals from 1992 to 2000 seemed to help voters associate him with the non-reform end of the reform-establishment dimension.

In 1996, Jackson, Perot, Steve Forbes, Lamar Alexander, and Colin Powell are clearly distinguished from the major party candidates (and Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich) along the second dimension. Interestingly, Buchanan is perceived as much closer to Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich than the "reform" candidates in 1996, but this is not unexpected given that he was running as a "traditional" Republican candidate in that election. Similarly, Bill Clinton was and quickly became associated with typical left-right partisan politics once he came onto the national scene.

In 1992, the variation along the y-axis ranges from Jesse Jackson and Pat Buchanan—both clearly perceived as outsider, reform candidates—to the Clintons and Bushes. Ross Perot loads somewhat in the middle, but is clearly distinct from the two major party candidates. The positions of the Republican and Democratic parties are somewhat unexpected, but neither loads as a true outsider on the "reform-establishment" dimension. In fact, the "establishment" hue of the Clinton-Gore and Bush-Quayle campaigns (as distinct from the Democrats and Republicans) might account for the relative placement of the parties.

Of course, an alternative explanation for the second dimension is that it simply captures affect. We are, after all, using thermometer measures of public figures. It is

therefore reasonable to wonder if variance along the y-axis simply captures variance in general, and positive versus negative affect in particular. While we concede that affect clouds the nature of the second dimension, it is not the case that “popular” figures constitute one end of the continuum and “unpopular” figures occupy the other. Furthermore, in 2006 and 2008 we asked respondents to “grade” the prospective presidential performance of political figures on an A-F scale, and used these grades to run the *MAP* estimates. The results were very close to those obtained using thermometer ratings, suggesting that the structure of the second dimension is not simply a function of the relative popularity of the figures.

Having said all this, the broader point to be made is that a spatial array of many—even most—of America’s national political figures in a two-dimensional space strongly suggests that voters from 1992-2004 thought of these people as (1) being liberal or conservative on economic issues, and (2) being inside or outside the traditional Washington political establishment.

Political Space in the 2008 Presidential Election

Let us now turn to CCES data from the 2008 election, which are used to generate figure 5.¹⁰ Here we see that the George W. Bush, John McCain, and Sarah Palin are all viewed as clustering to the right side of the horizontal axis, well-above the vertical axis. They look very much alike, and none of them appear to be viewed as reform figures (or “mavericks,” in the none-too-subtle language of the Alaskan governor). In the upper left

quadrant, Barack Obama is seen as distinct from Hillary Clinton, but he is also rated on the establishment side of the dimension. It is difficult to envision a dimension—other than the one we propose—in which Palin’s score loads so close to Obama’s.

[Figure 5 about here]

In short, Obama seems to have been seen as not quite part of the Washington establishment, but not quite an outsider. McCain, on the other hand, was clearly seen as representing the status-quo. McCain’s attempt to re-claim the reform mantle by nominating Sarah Palin did not work; she was not seen as a reform candidate and making her part of the ticket did not shift perceptions of McCain along these lines at all. As with the 1992-2004 figures, it is almost impossible to make sense of the spatial array of political figures using common alternative interpretations of the second dimension.

Voter Perceptions of Outsiders versus Insiders

Although there is good reason to believe that voters conceptualized the politics of 2008 in terms of insiders and outsiders, the *MAP* estimates for 2008 suggest that the presidential candidates were not viewed by voters as varying much along this dimension. At this point, it is obvious that understanding more about how voters think of these things requires direct and unique polling instrumentation. We began this process in 2006, crafting questions for a national survey conducted by Polimetrix and finding that dissatisfaction with “politics as usual” was acute in that election. For example, as seen in table 1, 68% of respondents agreed that “the federal government is mostly incompetent”

(29% strongly agreed). Furthermore, an eye-popping 82% agreed with the statement that “the federal government is mostly corrupt” (49% strongly agreed).

Interestingly, this sentiment did not manifest itself in over-whelming support for an outsider candidate in the 2008 presidential election. After the competence and corruption items, we asked the following question: “Candidate A is a current U.S. senator who has twice served in the president’s cabinet and has a reputation for knowing how to get things done in Washington. Candidate B is a current governor who has a reputation for challenging entrenched interests and not accepting ‘politics as usual.’ If both were running for president in 2008, which would you be more likely to support?” Fifty-four percent of respondents chose candidate A and 40% preferred candidate B. The lesson seems to be that although voters are cynical with respect to the federal government, they still seem to value experience and do not necessarily blindly embrace outsider candidates.

[Table 1 about here]

For the 2008 election, we developed additional instrumentation which we then employed in a post-election survey of Texas voters. Initially, we asked Lone Star respondents to rate themselves on a 7-point scale, in which “1” represents a preference for a candidate with “insider” credentials and “7” represents a preference for a candidate with “outsider” credentials.¹¹ Table 2 demonstrates that half preferred an outsider, while 23% preferred an “insider.” These results are different than those we saw in 2006, perhaps signaling a deepening of frustration with Washington and the status quo. Respondents were then asked to rate the experience and credentials of a series of public

figures on this “insider/outsider” scale. Sixty-four percent rated the self-proclaimed “maverick” McCain as an “insider,” compared to only 15% who rated him as an “outsider.” Obama, by contrast, was rated as an “insider” by 45%, compared to only 30% who rated him as an “outsider.” If one looks at the mean ratings on the scale, voters are at 4.1 (just to the reform side of the scale), Obama is at 3.8 and McCain in at 3.1. For comparison purposes, we also present ratings of the political parties, Texas Governor Rick Perry, Sarah Palin (41% rated her as an “outsider,” 33% as an “insider”), and iconoclastic author and musician Kinky Friedman. Again, the main finding is that neither of the major party candidates was perceived as an outsider or a reformer, despite the fact that they had reason to want to be seen as such.

[Table 2 about here]

In a second post-election poll of Texas voters, we once again asked voters to rate themselves and then to place a series of public figures on the 1-7 establishment to reform scale. Once again, voters said they preferred outsider to insider candidates: 53% to 20% (see table 3). And once again, they rated Obama as more of an insider than outsider—43% to 29%. Instead of McCain, we asked voters to rate Mitt Romney, perhaps the most vocal Republican critic of Obama’s economic proposals. Thirty-seven percent rated the former Massachusetts governor as an insider, while 20% rated him as an outsider. In examining the means, voters are at 4.2, Obama is at 3.8 and Romney is at 3.6. Other figures—including Texas congressman Ron Paul, Kinky Friedman, and Texas governor Rick Perry—were included in the same battery of questions for methodological and

substantive reasons. Only Friedman scores as an outsider. It seems that almost any politician was viewed as a creature of the establishment in 2008, limiting the ability of either major political party to maneuver favorably.

[Table 3 about here]

One might reasonably ask about the role of party in conditioning appraisals along the reform-establishment dimension. That is, isn't it likely that Democrats saw Obama as more of an outsider while Republicans saw McCain as more of an outsider? Actually, voters were remarkably similar in how they rated themselves along the reform-establishment dimension and in how they rated Obama and McCain. Republicans and independents were more attracted to outsider appeals compared to Democrats, but in 2008 even Democrats preferred a reformer by a 37% to 33% margin. Perhaps the most interesting finding when one controls for partisanship is that although independents saw Obama as more of an insider than outsider (43%-31%), they viewed McCain as a complete insider (77% insider-13% outsider). This was true among those under 30 years of age as well. Obama may not have been considered an entirely new and novel character, but he was certainly more of one than McCain.

Still, despite evidence that Texas voters preferred reform-minded, outsider candidates in 2008, we cannot be sure that either candidate harnessed this sentiment or that reform impulses subsequently had much affect on the presidential vote. In fact, preliminary evidence is quite surprising in this regard. If one examines the 2008 vote by self-rating on the insider-outsider dimension, one sees that Obama carries those

preferring an establishment candidate (58% Obama, 42% McCain) while McCain carries those preferring a reform candidate (55% McCain, 45% Obama). Apparently, those rating McCain as an insider rate Obama similarly. The obvious question arising from these numbers is how is it that Obama won if McCain was preferred by those favoring reform (the plurality position)? The key for Obama, it seems, is that those in the middle of the reform-establishment scale overwhelmingly preferred the Democrat (66% Obama, 33% McCain).

But the relationship between reform-establishment position and the vote requires a more rigorous test. Fortunately, the 2008 vote item allows us to model support for Obama as a function of either (1) self-placement on the reform-establishment scale, or (2) relative proximity to Obama (versus McCain) on the reform-establishment scale.¹² To estimate this model, we use a logistic regression estimator and control for potential confounding factors, such as party identification, race, ethnicity, and age. As with the bivariate analysis, table 4 shows that the more voters preferred an “outsider,” the less likely they were to vote for Obama. This relationship holds true even controlling for party identification. If one transforms the logit coefficient from the equation into a probability,¹³ our estimate is that for every one unit movement towards the reform end of our 1-7 scale, Obama’s vote probability drops 3 points. Again, while this result may seem puzzling at first, our interpretation is straight-forward. Obama was successful in convincing voters who valued competence and mastery of the system that he was up to the challenge of the presidency. In this sense, “change” was less about “reform” and

more about re-establishing some of the values supposedly lost during the Bush administration. Obama's change was thus more restoration than revolution.

[Table 4 about here]

The second model displayed in table 4 shows that support for Obama is significantly correlated with the perception that Obama was closer to the respondent than McCain on the reform-establishment scale. In other words, voters are much more likely to support the candidate more proximate to them on the reform-establishment issue dimension even when controlling for party, race, ethnicity, and age. The effect is not over-whelming but neither is it trivial; if Obama were to be perceived as one unit closer to the voter on the scale compared with McCain, the probability of an Obama vote increases by 5 points. In this sense, the candidates were correct in attempting to reach out to voters along these lines in 2008. But while Obama captured support from those preferring "insiders" and those in the middle of the reform-establishment scale, he also managed to limit the perception that McCain was more of an "outsider" than he among reform-minded voters. In this sense, he really was able to "have it both ways": a change candidate who knows how things work in Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

We entered this project with the expectation that 2008 was a year in which reform rhetoric would resonate mightily with voters. We conclude having been convinced that reform sentiment was a major component to how voters viewed politics in that election,

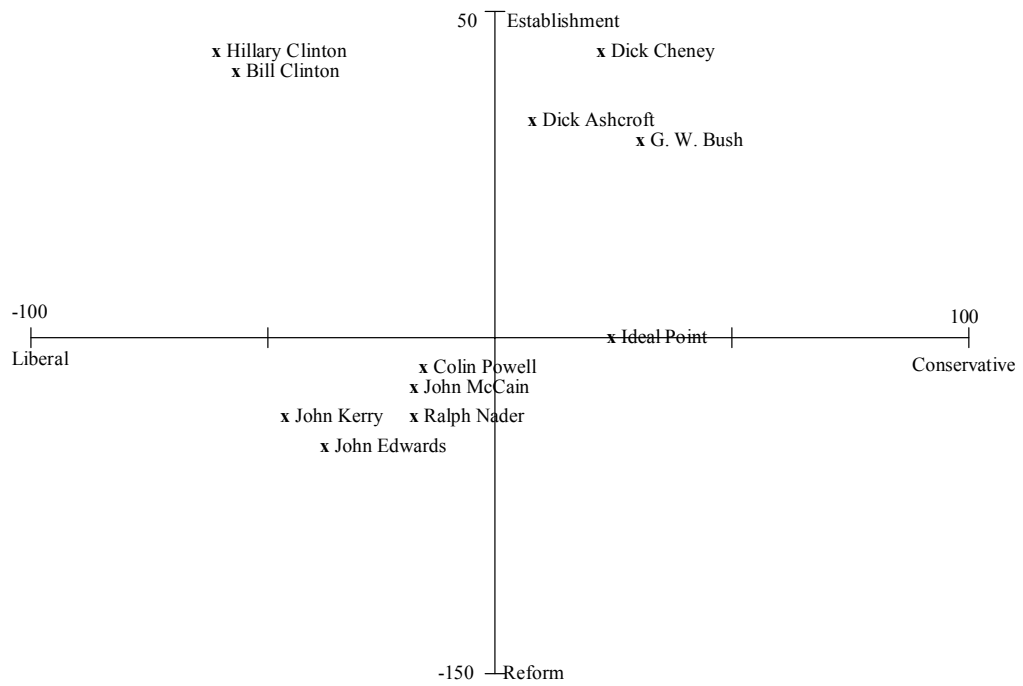
but also that successful candidates win by effectively positioning themselves vis-à-vis the major party opposition. In this way, we reaffirm Downs's lesson that it is not simply tapping into an issue dimension that matters; rather, it is the effective contrast between one's self and the opposition. There are many reasons that Obama won in 2008. One of them is that he established his insider credentials with those voters craving professionalism and competence, while simultaneously painting McCain as an extension of the incumbent administration among those desperate for an insurgent, reformist presidency.

In stating these conclusions so boldly, we do not wish to imply that the data and interpretations offered here are definitive. The limits of our study are perhaps more obvious to ourselves than to even the most astute observer. For example, as noted earlier, we would prefer measures of candidates and political figures that are not clouded by affective evaluations. The thermometer ratings surely contain an emotional component and thus make the subjective evaluation of political space even more difficult. In addition, the instrumentation and scale designed to capture reformist sentiment needs to be validated with even more measures and run over a series of elections. Finally, we would prefer a national poll to a survey from a single state—albeit one of the most populous and diverse states in the union—as well as validated measures of the presidential vote, given the tendency (which appears muted here) for winners to gain support in post-election polls.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we believe the data examined here offer important clues about the nature of electoral competition in the U. S. at the dawn of the 21st century. And, if we are right, debates on issues such as illegal immigration and health care ought to be viewed from a very different perspective than is currently being offered by either party or news media elites. In particular, we would argue that the potential for disruption within the current party system is significant. When the parties do not address issues judged salient by the public—when the linkage model identified earlier breaks down—reform sentiment can crystallize in the place of the absent issue debate. Similarly, reform sentiment can crystallize if new voting groups are mobilized but their interests are not structured effectively by the existing, left-right political debate. The rise of new issues and voting groups is long overdue for the post-New Deal party system, and the concomitant rise of a reform movement is a distinct possibility. We also urge future research efforts made to investigate how these two latent dimensions determine vote choices made by the mass electorates as well as by members of Congress.

Figure 1—

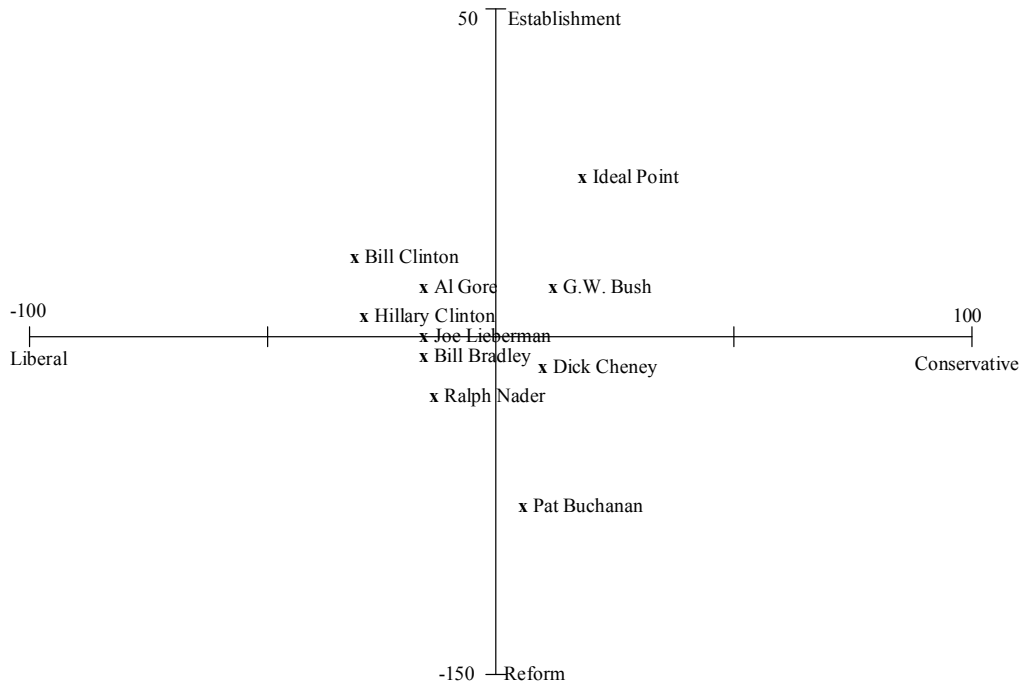
Political Figures in Two-Dimensional Issue Space, 2004



Notes: Positions of political figures in two-dimensional space are estimated based on *MAP* methodology (Hinich and Munger 1996), using thermometer score data from the 2004 NES. The centroid (0,0 point) is fixed as Ronald Reagan's ratings.

Figure 2—

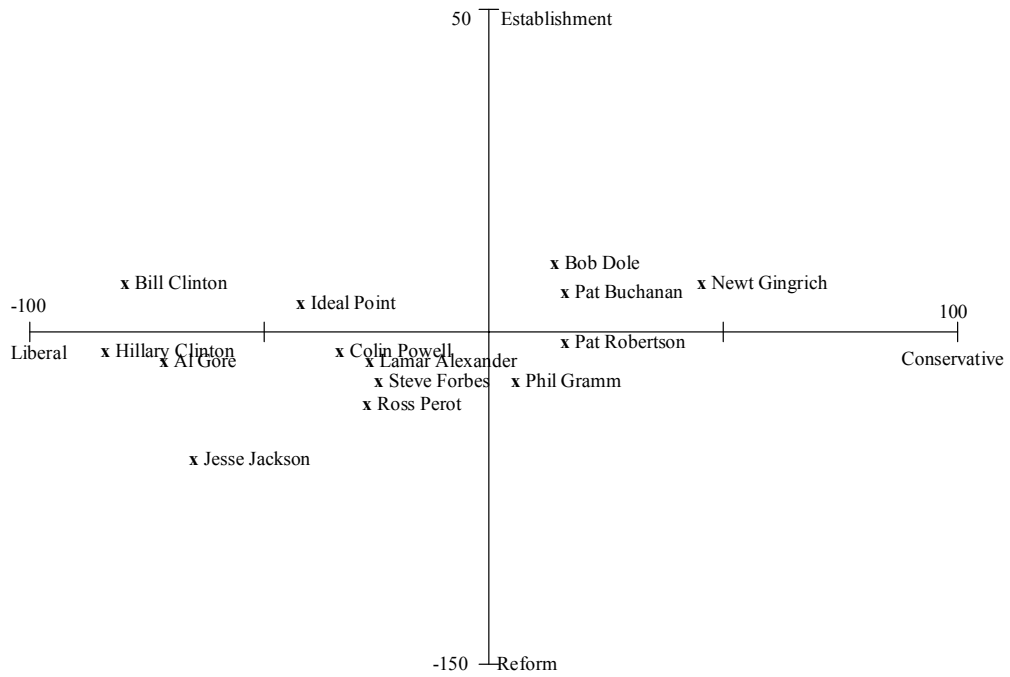
Political Figures in Two-Dimensional Issue Space, 2000



Notes: Positions of political figures in two-dimensional space are estimated based on *MAP* methodology (Hinich and Munger 1996), using thermometer score data from the 2000 NES. The centroid (0,0 point) is fixed as John McCain's ratings.

Figure 3—

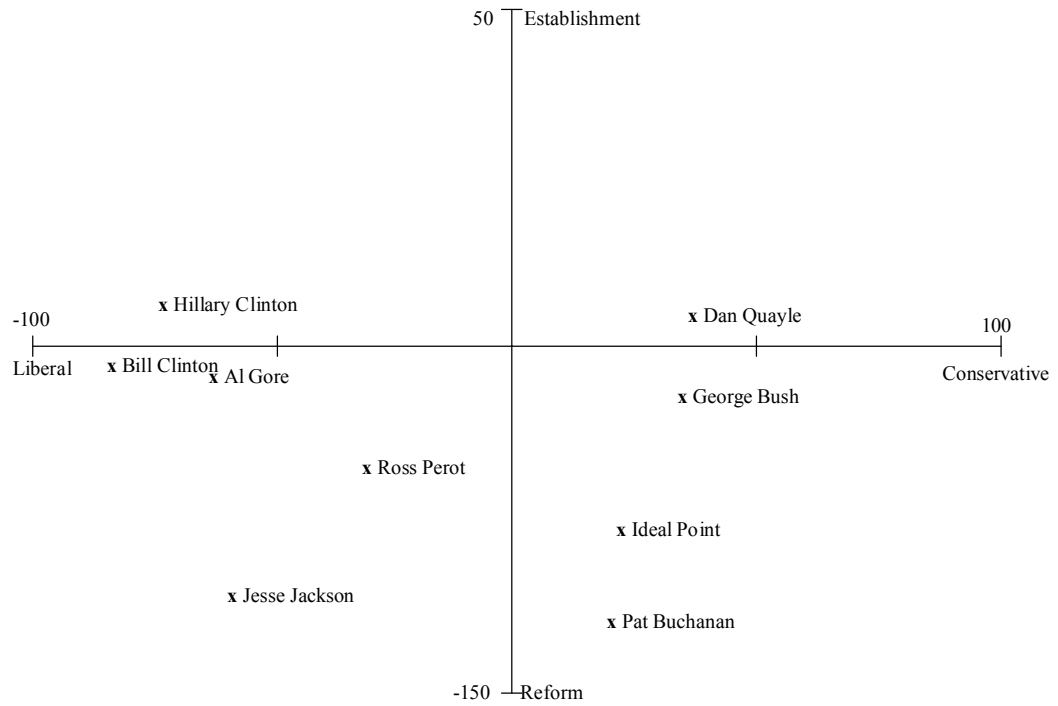
Political Figures in Two-Dimensional Issue Space, 1996



Notes: Positions of political figures in two-dimensional space are estimated based on *MAP* methodology (Hinich and Munger 1996), using thermometer score data from the 1996 NES. The centroid (0,0 point) is fixed as Jack Kemp's ratings.

Figure 4—

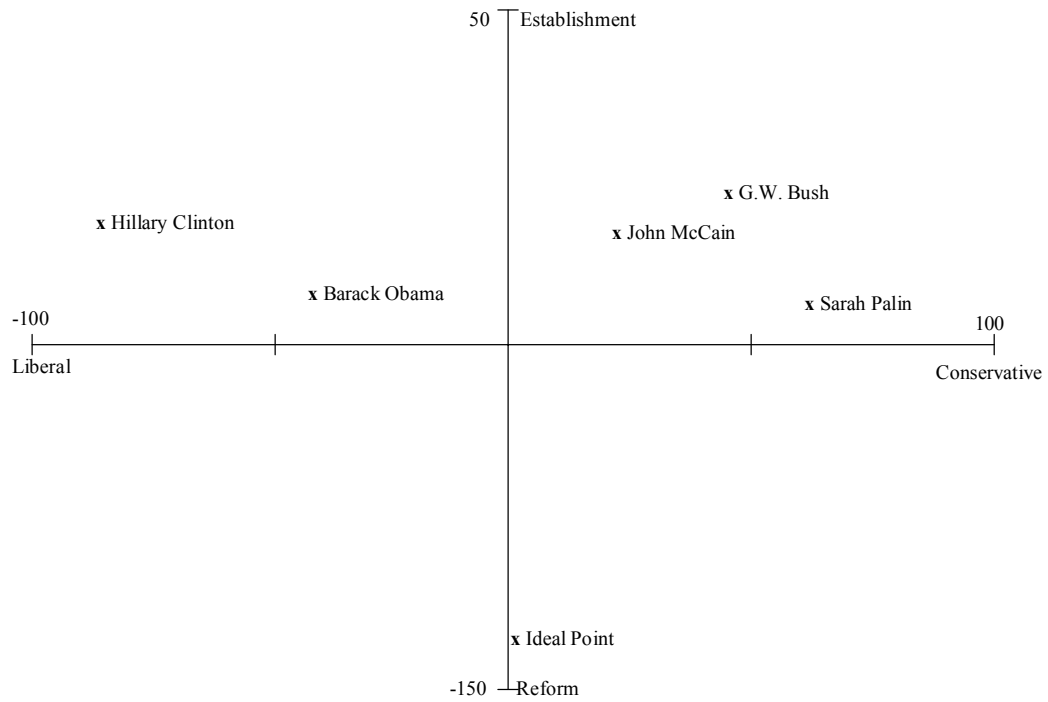
Political Figures in Two-Dimensional Issue Space, 1992



Notes: Positions of political figures in two-dimensional space are estimated based on *MAP* methodology (Hinich and Munger 1996), using thermometer score data from the 1992 NES. The centroid (0,0 point) is fixed as Barbara Bush's ratings.

Figure 5—

Political Figures in Two-Dimensional Issue Space, 2008



Notes: Positions of political figures in two-dimensional space are estimated based on *MAP* methodology (Hinich and Munger 1996), using thermometer score data from the 2008 CCES. The centroid (0,0 point) is fixed as Joe Biden's ratings.

Table 1—Testing America’s Appetite for Outsider Candidates in 2006

	“The federal government of the United States is mostly incompetent.”	“The federal government of the United States is mostly corrupt.”
Strongly Agree	29%	49%
Somewhat Agree	39	33
Somewhat Disagree	24	10
Strongly Disagree	5	4
Don’t know	3	4
N	1,000	1,000
<p>“Candidate A is a current U.S. senator who has twice served in the president’s cabinet and has a reputation for knowing how to get things done in Washington. Candidate B is a current governor who has a reputation for challenging entrenched interests and not accepting ‘politics as usual.’ If both were running for president in 2008, which would you be more likely to support?”</p>		
Candidate A	54%	
Candidate B	40	
Don’t know	6	
N	1,000	

Source: Data are from the University of Texas Module of the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, conducted by Polimetrix. The questions were asked in both positive and negative forms (half of the sample was asked if the government was competent, half if it was incompetent). The order of the competence and corruption items was also randomized.

Table 2—Respondents rate candidates and themselves on the Insider-Outsider dimension

	Self	Barack Obama	John McCain	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Sarah Palin	Kinky Friedman	Rick Perry
1="insider"	9%	24%	31%	25%	15%	11%	4%	24%
2	7	13	20	13	17	8	3	20
3	7	8	13	12	16	14	6	15
4="neutral"	20	17	13	20	20	17	13	16
5	15	12	7	9	9	13	9	4
6	18	9	4	4	6	12	11	4
7="outsider"	17	9	4	5	5	16	29	4
Avg.	4.1	3.8	3.1	3.4	3.5	4.4	4.9	3.0

Notes: Respondents were asked to consider a 1-7 continuum, in which 1 represents a candidate or party with experience in the ways of Washington and knowledgeable about federal government processes and policy-making, while 7 represents a candidate or party from outside the established Washington order intent on challenging entrenched interests and policies. They were then asked to tell us where their ideal candidate would be on this scale. They were then asked to rate where "xx" falls on this scale.

Source: Data are from the University of Texas Government Department Survey, February 2009, conducted by Polimetrix.

Table 3—Respondents rate candidates and themselves on the Insider-Outsider dimension

	Self	Barack Obama	Mitt Romney	Ron Paul	Kinky Friedman	Rick Perry
1="insider"	7%	18%	14%	12%	4%	26%
2	6	12	12	8	3	22
3	7	13	11	11	5	13
4="neutral"	20	19	18	20	12	15
5	17	11	8	8	9	6
6	16	8	7	6	16	2
7="outsider"	20	10	5	6	25	2
Avg.	4.2	3.8	3.6	3.8	4.8	2.7

Notes: Respondents were asked to consider a 1-7 continuum, in which 1 represents a candidate or party with experience in the ways of Washington and knowledgeable about federal government processes and policy-making, while 7 represents a candidate or party from outside the established Washington order intent on challenging entrenched interests and policies. They were then asked to tell us where their ideal candidate would be on this scale. They were then asked to rate where “___” falls on this scale.

Source: Data are from the University of Texas Government Department Survey, May 2009, conducted by Polimetrix.

Table 4—Estimating the Effects of the Insider-Outsider Ratings on the Presidential Vote

	Vote for Obama	Vote for Obama
Constant	3.079*** (0.388)	2.588*** (0.286)
Respondent Position on Insider-Outsider Question	-0.103* (0.052)	--
Relative Distance between Respondent and Candidates on Insider-Outsider Question	--	0.095** (0.036)
Party ID	1.940*** (0.141)	1.961*** (0.142)
Black	1.632*** (0.325)	1.676*** (0.323)
Hispanic	0.525** (0.187)	0.586** (0.186)
Under 30	0.623* (0.275)	0.655* (0.276)
-2 Log Likelihood	808.432	805.575
Nagelkerke Adjusted R-Square	0.490	0.492
N	924	924

Notes: Coefficients are derived through a logistic regression estimator, where the dependent variable is vote for Obama (1) versus anything else (0). Standard errors are presented in parentheses.

***significant at 0.001 level (one-tailed);

** significant at 0.01 level (one-tailed);

*significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Source: Data are from the University of Texas Government Department Survey, February 2009, conducted by Polimetrix.

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Notes

¹ Senator Obama's remark at the 2007 Labor Day Rally, Manchester, New Hampshire, September 03. The full script is available at

http://www.barackobama.com/2007/09/03/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_22.php. (last date of access: August 19, 2009)

² "McCain's 'Change' Speech," Holly Bailey, *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, June 3, 2008. The full report is available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/139906/page/2> (last date of access: August 19, 2009)

³ There is, of course, an enormous literature demonstrating that voters are not especially well-informed or engaged when it comes to politics (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). There is also a substantial contrary literature centered on how voters use cues and low-level rationality to reach optimal decisions (see Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991). We are agnostic on the question of whether individual voters have the information and cognitive capacity for utility maximization, however; the assumption of strategic rationality is a matter of convenience for generating testable hypotheses and can be relaxed at a later time.

⁴ For example, see Jacoby 2004 or Shafer and Claggett 1995.

⁵ A full description of the linkage model, along with its mathematical derivation and explanatory figures, is available from the authors upon request.

⁶ Chapter 4 of Enelow and Hinich (1984) presents the algebraic details of the inheritance of quadratic preferences in a low dimensional space.

⁷ The issue items ask respondents to place themselves on a 1-7 scale, with 1 representing, for example, the conservative extreme on the issue and 7 representing the liberal extreme. Subsequent items then ask the respondent to place the presidential candidates or the political parties on the issue. We examine items on the level of government services, the level of defense spending, the level of aid to blacks, and attitudes about the root causes of criminal behavior (this last item is only available for 1996). Collectively, these

items encompass social welfare (services), social (crime), race (aid to blacks), and security (defense spending) issues, all of which have been offered as relevant to contemporary American party competition.

⁸ In fact, the properties of the NES and CCES surpass what is immediately necessary. At a minimum, the Cahoon-Hinich method for determining the political space requires party score data from a group of respondents who are representative of the politically active citizens in a society. Although the NES and CCES are national random samples, respondents need not be a random sample of the voters for *MAP* to work since its purpose is to determine the political space and not predict an election. It is important, however, that the party preferences of respondents span the political space. For example, if the space is the standard one-dimensional European left-right space, then the respondents must range from the extreme left to the extreme right. It is also important to note that the wording of the issue questions is vital because the respondents must recognize the issue in each question. It is not unusual for researchers to inadvertently project their political conceptions onto the survey and into the minds of respondents. Fortunately, this does not appear to be an issue here.

⁹ The particulars of the 2004 two-dimensional map may also be influenced by the selection of Ronald Reagan as the pivot-point. Having passed away in 2004, Reagan (or, more specifically, respondent attitudes towards Reagan) seemed likely to serve as a fairly non-partisan centroid. This may not have been the case, although using other figures as the pivot-point hardly ameliorates the problem.

¹⁰ The data come from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a survey of 32,800 Americans conducted during October and November of 2008. The survey had a pre/post design and was a cooperative venture of 30 Universities and over 100 Political Scientists. CCES was completed on-line and fielded by the survey research firm, Polimetrix, Inc. located in Palo Alto, CA. Steve Ansolabehere (MIT) was the Principal Investigator of the project and Lynn Vavreck (UCLA) served as the Study Director. A design committee collaborated to write the first 120 questions of the survey, called the Common Content. All 32,800 respondents completed this part of the survey. Each CCES team then drafted its own unique content that followed the Common Content. Each team received 1,000 unique respondents who completed

both the Common Content and the Team Module. Interviewed respondents were selected from the Polimetrix PollingPoint Panel using sample matching. A random sub sample of size 36,500 was drawn from the 2004 American Community Study (ACS), conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which is a probability sample of size 1,194,354 with a response rate of 93.1% (participation in the ACS is mandatory). For each respondent in the selected ACS sub sample, the closest matching active PollingPoint panelist was selected using the measure of distance: $d(x,y)$. Subsequent data analyses presented in this paper rely on the 2006 CCES, which employed the same methodology and had very similar response rates. The overall sample size for that study was 38,443.

¹¹ The data come from the February 2009 Department of Government/University of Texas survey. The web-based poll was conducted by YouGov/Polimterix and included the responses of 1,000 adult Texans.

¹² This is measured as follows: (self-rating – rating of McCain) – (self-rating – rating of Obama).

¹³ A bi-variate logit model can be written as $\ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = \alpha + \beta X$ where $\ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right)$ is the log of the odds ratio of voting for Obama to not voting for Obama; α is the intercept, X is the data matrix, and β is the estimated logit coefficients. The equation shown above, however, does not directly provide intuitive interpretation of the coefficients. To gain more substantive understanding, we therefore transform logit coefficients to predicted conditional probabilities.