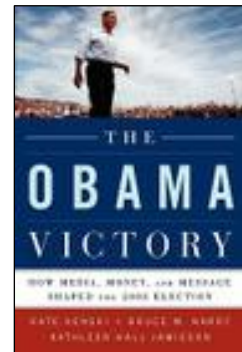


Kate Kenski, Bruce W. Hardy, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, **The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Elections**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 302 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$21.95 (paperback).

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Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson's *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Elections* provides a scrupulous and revealing analysis of the 2008 presidential election campaigns. They draw heavily on data from the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which Jamieson directs and at which Hardy is a senior research analyst. The authors exhaustively examine information on voter favorability and public opinion during the campaigns, focusing on the five months leading up to the general election, and offering an extensive analysis of how media, money, and messaging affected voters' opinions of the candidates. This volume is not for the politically faint of heart, but *The Obama Victory* likely will be viewed in the future as the go-to source for a comprehensive perspective on the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States.



The authors begin by considering four notable factors, or forces, that shaped the campaigns: (1) "The Economy and the Unpopular Incumbent," (2) "McSame versus the Tax-and-Spend Liberal," (3) "McCain: Out of Touch/Too Old," and (4) "Obama: Not Ready to Lead." Starting with an analysis of President George W. Bush and his unpopular administration, the authors make a strong case that a telling indicator of how voters would cast their ballots was how closely they associated each candidate with a continuation of Bush's policies. When the economy continued to decline—in parallel to Bush's approval ratings—it became imperative for each candidate to separate himself from the incumbent and put forward a message of change.

Chapter 2 walks readers through the back-and-forth attacks between the candidates as each tried to make the other look like an inept supporter of Bush's status quo. By examining excerpts from debates, messaging from candidate advertising, and the recurring key words of the campaigns ("maverick," "hope," "change"), *The Obama Victory* sheds new light on the Bush factor and details the extreme strategic planning behind each campaign.

For example, by reviewing the millions of dollars spent by each candidate in television advertising during the campaigns, the authors show how John McCain's team changed strategy mid-October and abandoned the "McCain/Palin: Real Change" messages in favor of Obama-targeted tattack ads designed to shift the focus to Obama's alleged inexperience. "We tested months of positive McCain stuff and it didn't move a single number. To the extent that we had a chance, this race had to be about Senator Obama," says McCain pollster Bill McInturff (p. 37). In response, the Obama campaign spent more than \$14 million on broadcast ads designed to reinforce the image of McCain as another President Bush. Sparing no details,

The Obama Victory dissects these ads, pointing out Obama's clever use of a photograph of Bush and McCain hugging in 2004, and the wily plugging of a sound clip in which McCain says, "I voted with the president over 90% of the time. Higher than, uh, a lot of my, uh, even Republican colleagues" (p. 39).

The Obama Victory provides important new election insights from sifting through voter data. Building on 57,000 telephone interviews with prospective voters conducted by the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), the authors develop telling graphs and charts. For example, one graph shows the percentage of respondents who agreed that electing McCain would be like electing Bush for a third term. Classifying respondents as "heavy" or "light" news users, suggests that heavy news users were more likely to associate McCain with Bush. Separating respondents by party identification also shows a steady increase over time in voters who agreed that electing McCain would amount to electing Bush for a third term. The authors argue, "Between June 9 and November 11, each day was associated with a 0.035 percent increase in the public buying the McSame argument" (p. 41).

The charts also show a close link between high profile campaign moves and voter favorability toward candidates, which ebbed and flowed with public debates, media appearances, vice presidential announcements, and national advertising spending. No matter how closely readers followed the 2008 campaign, they will learn something new here.

For example, *The Obama Victory's* dissection of McCain's vice presidential pick of Sarah Palin charts voter favorability over the five months leading up to Election Day. The authors find that Obama's ratings rocketed immediately after announcing Joe Biden as his running mate, but McCain's ratings stagnated with his pick of Palin, only rising once the Republic Convention was in full swing. *The Obama Victory* ultimately shows that from the day Biden was selected, it was Obama's race to win, with McCain futilely playing catch-up for the remainder of the campaign.

The authors "draw on NAES data to argue Palin's presence on the Republican ticket was a mixed blessing that over time became a curse," (p 152). One fascinating chart tracks voters' perception of Palin and how prepared she was to be president over a two-month span. Beginning with her weak interview with *ABC News'* Charlie Gibson two weeks after she was nominated, the voters' view of the Alaska governor's presidential readiness consistently plunged until election day. The disastrous Katie Couric interview and Tina Fey's *Saturday Night Live* parodies of Palin only weakened voters' confidence in her.

For communication scholars, the book's brightest gems arrive in the final two chapters: "Spending Differences and the Role of Microtargeting" and "The Effect of Messages." Confirming that campaign spending does equate to votes, *The Obama Victory* walks readers through the relationship between money and candidate favorability in the 2008 election. One graph tracks candidate favorability against candidates' national advertising spending, showing there is a general trend of candidate favorability increasing each time a candidate did an expensive advertising push, even if there is no clear-cut ratio between dollars spent and favorability points. For example, after Obama spent \$4 million on a half-hour infomercial in late October, there was an immediate spike in his favorability rating. The authors note,

Overall, when we concentrate on respondents in the non-battleground and control for demographics, political orientation, and media use, we find that weeks in which Obama outspent McCain on national ads are significantly related to an Obama vote 'if the election were held today.' (p. 267)

Furthermore, by assessing advertisement gross rating points (GRPs), which measure audience exposure to an ad, the authors conclude that radio advertising was the most effective medium to win votes. Because Obama outspent McCain by more than \$12 million in radio advertising, this GRP advantage worked in his favor.

A 100 GRP advantage for Obama in local TV advertising increases by 1.5 percent the probability that a person with a baseline probability of 50 percent will say that if the election were held on the day of interview she would cast an Obama vote, cable produces a 4.1 percent impact, and radio, a 5.5 percent one. When we put the three media's advertising GRP differences in the same model, only radio produces a significant coefficient. (p. 274)

The explanation for radio's high impact on votes is that, unlike the other media, radio is pinpointed and allows for microtargeting. Since broadcast and cable have larger audience coverage than does radio, they do not exhibit as significant of a direct relationship between GRP and votes.

The Obama Victory is an ambitious attempt to better understand the 2008 presidential election by identifying and analyzing the components of each candidate's campaign. The authors' extensive research and painstaking efforts to provide an objective, statistical analysis of the campaign trails makes good sense. The rigorous dependence on data is impressive. Overall, *The Obama Victory* is a lively and enlightening perspective on the 2008 election.