



Candidates' strategy clear already

Three factors will influence the outcome of the US presidential race, writes Geoff Garrett

BARACK Obama will face off against John McCain in November's US presidential election. Early polls suggest that McCain vs Obama will be a tight race. But the broad strategy of both candidates is already quite clear.

Obama's core message of changing the way Washington works will elide with portraying McCain, *right*, as nothing more than a third term of failed and unpopular Bush policies from Iraq to fat cat tax cuts.

McCain's response will be to cite Hillary Clinton's assessment that he, not Obama, is up to being Commander-in-Chief. He also will characterise Obama as today's John Kerry or Mike Dukakis, weak liberal elitists out of step with mainstream America.

How the two campaigns play with voters will be affected by three factors. The first two are largely beyond their control, and are likely to favour Obama: the parlous state of the US economy and the weakening shadow of 9/11.

American voters always punish the president and his party for economic bad times, even if he cannot either cause or end recessions. Obama will benefit from subprime meltdown's moving from Wall Street to Main Street. He doesn't need a policy plan so much as a platform for feeling the pain of voters.

This pro-Obama dynamic could be mitigated if the US economy rebounds in the second half of the year, as some are predicting. But, on balance, the economy is more likely to help Obama

than hurt him, and there is little McCain, a self-acknowledged economics neophyte, can do about it.

The second issue hovering in 2008 is how strong the post 9/11 overhang will be. After President George W. Bush's re-election in 2004, Britain's *Daily Mirror* infamously asked how so many Americans could be so dumb? The simple answer is that America was still in the pall of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. The US already was bogged down in Iraq and the war was losing support at home. But Kerry didn't think he could run on a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq.

Four years later, 9/11 has receded in American minds. The Iraq war is profoundly unpopular, there have been no terrorist attacks on US soil, and voters are unconvinced that it is necessary to "fight them over there, so we don't have to fight them over here".

This also should play into Obama's hands against McCain, given his stated willingness to stay in Iraq for 100 years if necessary. The worse things get in Iraq, the better for Obama - irrespective of how bad a downward spiral would be for Iraqis and the broader Middle East. A terrorist attack in America or on Americans would have the opposite political effect in the presidential election, but the Bush Administration will do all it can to ensure this does not happen.

The candidates may have more control over the final issue that will shape the campaign: how they appeal to voters as people.

McCain's stature in American politics is built on his incredible personal biography as a decorated naval officer who endured 5½ years as a prisoner in the Vietnam War. He has parlayed this into a long Senate career as a maverick whose finger is never raised to test the political winds. McCain plays well with independent voters because his positions are often at odds with most

Republicans, such as his aggressive regulatory plan against climate change.

McCain is about the best candidate the Republicans could hope for, simultaneously to defend an unpopular war and win voters outside the party's apparently shrinking base.

But he has some liabilities, most notably his infamous temper and the fact that he would be the oldest-ever American president, and one with a history of significant health problems. Maintaining his serenity and his energy on the campaign trail will be just as important as the issues in how McCain plays with voters.

Democrat Obama is in many ways the anti-McCain. Calm to a fault, he would be America's fifth-youngest president. Obama is also the child of a Kenyan father and an American mother who partially raised him in Indonesia and gave him his middle name Hussein. Obama appeals to people who are tired of the same old partisan politics and who hunger for something different. They forgive him his political inexperience and are inspired by his charisma. He also plays well with independents.

Obama, too, has his personal challenges. No one seemed to care about his Columbia and Harvard education until his the-bitterness-of-Middle-America remarks. Voters seemed to buy his judgment-over-experience line until it was strained by his long association with firebrand, the Rev Jeremiah Wright.

Above all, Obama is an African American who in the Democratic primaries won 90 per cent of black votes but has struggled mightily to win the support of less educated and older whites and Latinos. He must recapture the transcendent lustre he possessed at the beginning of 2008 by November.

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