The Election of Barack Obama

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How He Won

Baodong Liu

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THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA
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For Lu

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Preface

When Barack Obama gave his name-making keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, few people could predict his stunning victory only four years later in the historic presidential election. Indeed, Obama's election as the first African American president was so "sudden" to the nation and even "shocking" to many experienced political observers that how he was elected continues to invite public fascination and intellectual scrutiny. Some argued that voters voted based on emotions rather than rationality. Therefore, Obama won because of his soaring rhetoric instead of his substance. Some even suggested that Obama won because of voters' psychological need to redeem the nation from its history of racial inequality. Some simply believed that the Obama success can only be explained by pure luck because of the unpopularity of President George W. Bush and the nation's economic crisis. Some were puzzled by, and they deeply questioned, the way the Democratic primaries were conducted. Perhaps the most memorable accusation against the Obama candidacy was made by Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman on a major party's presidential ticket. Ferraro commented to a Los Angeles newspaper on March 7, 2008: "If he [Barack Obama] was a woman—of any color—he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And the country is caught up in the concept."[1]

Conceivably, Obama ran his well-organized and technologically innovative campaign based on an inspiring message of hope that intentionally appealed to Americans' emotions and their deep-seated creed of "created equal." This book, however, will show how Obama's 2008 racial coalition was more than just voter emotion. I demonstrate that voters were rational, basing their choices on their perceived group interests. Their voting decisions still reflected their best voting strategy in their racial contexts given the choices available. To indicate that voters, in the words of V. O. Key Jr., "are not fools," however, by no means downplays the vision and effectiveness of Obama's own campaign strategy to win in the first place.[2] Arguably, Obama won the White House by defeating two of the most powerful political figures in recent decades and their massive campaign organizations—Hillary Clinton in the primaries and John McCain in the

general election. This book shows how and why his campaign strategy, both sequential and spatial, worked.

To go beyond voters' emotion, I followed Rodney Hero's call that "more scholarly attention needs to focus on the 'big picture' of state politics, and states need to be seen as central to the 'big picture' of U.S. politics."[3] I examine the "big picture" by returning to how two major parties compete against each other by building *winning* coalitions in the coalition space, and how voters make rational judgments to protect their own interests by joining coalitions. This book, in particular, is about how *minimum* winning coalitions can be built with race as the center of contention. Expanding William Riker's original work on political coalitions to the multiracial politics in the new era, I explain why a *multiracial* coalition based on voter rationality is central to Obama's groundbreaking victory in 2008.[4]

To trace the effect of time, I use both macro and micro approaches. At the macro level, I link Obama's winning coalition to the history of the two-party system in the United States and the profound impact of racial demographic changes since 1965. At the micro level, this book pays attention to the details of the hard-fought primaries in terms of the sequence of the election. Contrary to the popular momentum theory, which emphasizes the early victories in Iowa and New Hampshire and media manipulation of uninformed voters, my analysis shows how Obama's politics of hope actually worked. More importantly, this book demonstrates that "place" or "state context" matters. In other words, this book is about not only time but also space. It is a book that stresses the importance of political geography.

To show states' central role in this political geography, I especially draw inspirations from several contextual theorists who provided competing theories on black density, racial diversity, political culture, and social capital.[5] In doing so, this book explains why Obama's "red state" strategy helped him win the highest office. Obama's success reveals how these scholars' works captured the complexity and vitality of American democracy, and why none of these works can explain the "big picture" individually.

By examining the racial groups' voting choices over time and across space, the purpose of this book, thus, is twofold: first, to document the Obama multiracial coalition from both the historic and spatial perspectives; and second, to explain voters' rationality throughout the election.

To accomplish these goals, I heavily rely on not only the exit poll data regarding specific voter groups' voting preferences in 2008 but also longitudinal national surveys, such as the National Election Study (NES), General Social Surveys (GSS), Gallup polls, U.S. Census data, and RealClearPolitics survey average scores of the Electoral College votes prior

to the November 4 general election. The book also takes advantage of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology and other techniques to visualize the election outcome and vote choice data. Wherever it is possible, the book avoids detailed mathematic and statistical modeling in order to provide easy access for not only professional researchers across disciplines but also general interest readers. Though mathematic and statistical models can be found in Chapter 2, where the minimum winning coalition line and the rate of change are computed, and in Chapter 6 where a racial tension index, based on a principal component analysis, is developed, readers who wish to focus on the theoretical and empirical work of the book can simply skip these short sections of mathematic and statistical presentations.

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