How Barack Obama Won the U.S. Presidency

President Barack Obama's 2008 victory was as much about messaging, media and funding as anything else, according to a new book co-authored by UA researcher Kate Kenski.

(Vocus) September 13, 2010 -- Touted as one of the most comprehensive evaluations of the 2008 presidential election, a newly published book co-authored by Kate Kenski argues that President Barack Obama's win was the result of a balance among messaging, media representation and campaign spending.

The book, which drew on election survey results, serves to answer a key question: Did support for one major-party nominee or the other shift when money was married to particular messages and when media highlighted them?

To answer that question, Kenski and her collaborators concentrated on the processes at play in presidential elections, the factors that affected their outcomes and mechanisms by which those effects occurred.

Where Obama did exceedingly well compared to McCain was "consistent and effective messaging" that focused keenly on issues that both the media and general public deemed important, said Kenski, a University of Arizona assistant professor of communication and lead author of the book.

"The media influence the priorities of people, but that is not the same as changing vote preferences of people," Kenski said. "Had the media focused heavily on issues other than the economy, the outcome may have changed."

The nearly 400-page book, "The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Election," has been published by the Oxford University Press.

Kenski collaborated with Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, and Bruce W. Hardy, a doctoral student and senior research analyst at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

Detailed and thoroughly documented, the text is fitting for students and scholars but also is written in highly accessible language for the general public.

Thomas B. Edsall of The New Republic reviewed the book, noting that it "could transform the way we understand presidential campaigns."

Another reviewer, Samuel Popkin, a political science professor at the University of California, San Diego, wrote that the book is the best analysis of a presidential election in recent history.

It is a "game changer for scholars, pundits and strategists," Popkin continued.

For their data-rich text, the team evaluated National Annenberg Election Survey data collected from more than 57,000 voters.
"It was a novel design that allowed the tracking of public opinion across the campaign," said Kenski, who was on the team that first implemented the survey during her graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Kenski, Jamieson and Hardy also interviewed campaign advisers and investigated the use of political advertising, financial backing, the effects of targeted messages and news coverage of the vice presidential nominees, among other things.

Kenski said the team found that a number of specific events and parodies as well as opinions expressed by McCain and then-Gov. Sarah Palin also helped to elevate the Obama-Biden ticket.

Recall Rev. Jeremiah Wright's infamous quote, "God damn America;" Obama's run in with Joe the Plumber; Tina Fey uttering, "I can see Russia from my house" in one of her many Palin parodies; the great debate about Obama's religion; Republican former Secretary of State Colin Powell's endorsement of Obama; and the controversy over McCain claiming he did not know the number of homes he owned.

But Obama was not always sure to win the election.

In fact, his favorability ratings were closely aligned with McCain's on a few occasions. Also, Biden and Palin had comparable ratings toward the end of the conventions, but where Biden's remained flat, Palin's was on a steady decline.

"In some way, what's more amazing is that Obama won the primaries more so than the general election," Kenski said.

Kenski also noted that other important and interesting influences and alignments occurred throughout the campaign to help elevate Obama's status.

In addition to the economic and political climates, the team determined that digital media and entertainment, radio campaign advertisements and early voting vastly shaped how the election would unfold.

Also, by the third presidential debate in October 2008, McCain’s message was gaining traction, "but early voting had already started and Obama had already started to bank votes," Kenski said.

"Early voting has changed how one runs a campaign. If one finds the right message for the public, it won’t be effective if given too late," she said.

And, for the most part, Obama was highly regarded in the popular media and the nation was still largely frustrated over George W. Bush’s leadership and his administration.

"We look at the past as a prediction of the future," Kenski said. "There are changes cycle to cycle, and we – researchers, practitioners and candidates – have to stay on top of these changes to understand how these elections work."

This story and photos are online at http://uanews.org/node/33104. Contact information follows this story.

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