




## Presidential Politicking in New Hampshire

Politics is one of the major tools of economic development in the small but considerable northern New England state of New Hampshire, where I reside. It draws people other than dedicated skiers to the state in those frozen months of November through January, when the first-in-the-nation presidential primary campaigns are in the home stretch. And while the state used to belong to the category of fly-over or “just plain ignore” states during the general election campaigns, nowadays New Hampshire is much courted and ardently wooed through quadrennial summers and falls. The candidates and campaigns that once found us conveniently ignorable now find us utterly adorable. 

What has changed? Well, Republicans may be loath to admit it, but the fact that the Democrats are stronger, are winning elections, and have put the State House and its corner office as well as the state’s four electoral votes in play means that both parties must fight for election in the Granite State. They cannot, as the tired old pun has it, take the Granite state for granite.

Meanwhile, Massachusetts to the south is even more nearly unanimous in support of the Democrats than New Hampshire used to be for the Republicans. Vermont is less solidly partisan, but its politics are essentially “crunchy granola” and who will drive for hours to fight over granola? Maine is whatever Maine is, which is apparently nothing to get excited about, unless you think Republican Senators Susan Collins and Olympia Snow are the wave of the future for their party (they are kind of, sort of, Republicans) and the country. Further north is Canada and due east there is only the ocean — that water’s edge where politics stops, except when we are disputing Maine over the state boundaries and territorial waters and such.

Today, more than ever, all roads to the White House run through New Hampshire and through all four seasons. That is why John McCain keeps coming back here. For a while, Bob Dole did, too, but he may have been simply lost trying to get out of the state after losing the primary here three times. Wife Elizabeth was wiser and dropped out before New Hampshire voted in 2000. Last Saturday, Barack Obama was back in Manchester and drawing a large enthusiastic crowd in the state’s largest city. Police estimated the crowd in Veterans Memorial Park at more than 10,000.

They were mostly, but not entirely New Hampshire voters. Many came up from Massachusetts, where Republicans are the political equivalent of boat people. Some came from Connecticut, where first Lowell Weicker and then Joe Lieberman, having helped discredit their respective parties, have gone on to give independence a bad name. They were mostly, but not entirely, Democrats. Many were independents. John McCain has drawn respectable crowds on his visits here, but people are not crossing state lines to chant, “More of the same! More of the same!” They did come from other states to



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cheer Obama's call for "Change we can believe in."

Republicans would be happy to tell them that Obama has the most liberal voting record in the U.S. Senate. Democrats will counter that McCain has voted the Bush line more than 90 percent of the time. Obama has voted as often with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. But most voters don't study and compare voting records. They do know when they want change. And Jurassic John just doesn't look or sound like change, even with the glamorous, moose-hunting, tax-cutting, reform-minded governor of Alaska at his side.

McCain once had a reputation as a reformer, but that was a couple of campaign cycles ago. McCain likes to rail against what has been wrong in Washington for the past 30 years, Obama reminded the partisans gathered under a warm sun and blue skies in Manchester. "What he forgets to tell you is that he's been there for 26 of those years and he hasn't done anything about it." There. Obama dismisses the "experience" issue as quickly and easily as Paris Hilton has solved the energy crisis in her only campaign commercial so far. ("Since the wrinkly white-haired guy hs put me in a campaign commercial, I guess I'm running for president.") And how seriously can anyone take the "experience" argument, anyway, when it is made by the same veteran senator who admits that he and his colleagues arrived in the nation's capital to change Washington, but instead, "Washington changed us."

Consider the presidents who had the most experience when arriving at the White House: Lyndon Johnson; Richard Nixon; George H. W. Bush Consider all the experience and accumulated wisdom brought to the service of the current president: Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, both of whom have been serving presidents since the Ford and even Nixon administrations. Paul Wolfowitz was among this administration's foreign policy "experts." Dr. Condoleezza Rice was another. Yes, all that experience and expertise has certainly made a difference: we might never have started a needless multi-trillion dollar war without it.

John McCain has said that when he enters the White House he will tell the special interests they are through running things in Washington, Obama noted. "Who's he going to tell, his campaign chairman?" Obama asked. "Who's he going to tell, his campaign manager?" McCain's campaign staff is so loaded with lobbyists that it is hard to believe they wouldn't be running his White House.

Obama has the numbers on his side, too. The numbers that showed how average household income went up during the eight years of the Clinton presidency and has gone down in the eight years of George W. Bush. The number \$5 million, which is the annual income that John McCain has said makes someone rich. "I guess someone making \$4 million is struggling," Obama said. Then there is the number of jobs that have gone overseas in the global economy. The candidate did not say just how or if he would stop or even slow that globalization, but at least he and a Democratic Congress would stop giving tax breaks to corporations that are shipping jobs and profits overseas.

And if the eight years of George Bush were not a heavy enough load for McCain to carry, there is the added weight of former Sen. Phil Gram of Texas and his Ph.D in economics to bear. Earlier this year, Gram, then McCain's economic adviser, told interviewers that the only recession going on is a "mental recession" and that America is becoming a "nation of whiners." Americans are not whiners, Obama insisted. Many are working two or three jobs, just to get by and are not complaining about it.

"But they expect to have a government that's fighting for them," he said. Instead we have a government fighting the wrong people in the wrong country, while Osama bin Laden continues to direct terrorist activities from a cave in Afghanistan or Pakistan. And a McCain campaign directed by Karl Rove



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continues to rely on distractions.

“They’ll talk about lipstick and pigs,” Obama said. They will put Brittany Spears and Paris Hilton in their campaign ads. They will continue to avoid the issues, he insisted.

So Obama went on, talking about healthcare, education from early childhood to college or university, fighting poverty, building infrastructure and more. And if Republicans ask how to pay for all that, he will remind them of the \$10 billion a month the Bush administration is spending on a war the Iraqis neither provoked nor asked for and how that money can be better “invested.”

That “investment” would be made by the government, of course, with the money supposedly intended to aid the private sector coming from the private sector. But Obama did not make that particular point, and the crowd ate up his promises of change, cheering and waving a sea of blue and white Obama signs. Later, some of them had lunch in downtown restaurants. In one of them, I met a couple of women who had come up from Connecticut to attend the rally and go canvassing for Obama. Behind the counter, serving sandwiches and ale, the moonlighting chairman of the Republican City Committee tried to dampen the enthusiasm for the tall dark stranger from Illinois.

“There are sixty days to go,” he said “A lot can change.”

Well, that, I guess, is the bottom line. One way or another, change will happen. In fact, one thing has already changed here in New Hampshire: competitive races have increased economic activity in downtown Manchester. It may even result in full employment for New Hampshire Republicans.



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