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Hulsman, John C.

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Texas and Ohio: The End of the Beginning, But Not the Beginning of the End

John C. Hulsman

Hillary Clinton hat sich mit den Vorwahlsiegen in Ohio und Texas einen Namen als Harry Houdini im amerikanischen Wahlkampf gemacht. Die scheinbar unaufhaltbare Nominierung von Barack Obama durch die Demokraten nach elf siegreichen Vorwahlen in Folge ist gestoppt. Für dieses Zauberkunststück hat Clinton sich nicht gescheut, eine Negativkampagne gegen den Konkurrenten aus dem eigenen Lager zu starten: Obama wird dabei immer wieder als unzuverlässiges Leichtgewicht in Fragen der nationalen Sicherheit hingestellt. Das fortgesetzte Kopf-an-Kopf-Rennen macht es für beide Kandidaten schwierig, die notwendige Anzahl von Delegierten für die Nominierung zu erringen. Diese Unentschiedenheit schadet den Demokraten enorm und spielt direkt in die Hände der Republikaner.

Following supposedly pivotal Super Tuesday in early February, something rather surprising happened in this roller-coaster of an election campaign: the Democrats seemed, at long last, to have decisively moved toward one of the party's candidates. Barack Obama won 11 straight contests, often by decisive margins. Hillary Clinton's rather desperate pleas that somehow these victories did not count began to ring more than a little hollow. She said he can only win caucus states (Maryland holds a primary), only mesmerize young and African-American voters (the Maine and Washington caucuses are overwhelmingly minority-free states with older populations), and only win little states (Virginia is exactly the sort of big swing state the Democrats need to capture if they are going to win the presidency). Obama won them all, and by decisive margins.

What followed should have made all American political observers nervous; another week of Clinton obituaries (these people have risen from the political grave

more often than Dracula). Stories appeared about the disarray in her campaign, how they had blown through \$120 million dollars with precious little to show for it. Why these folks had not even thought about a post-Super Tuesday strategy, so confident were they that Hillary would lock up the nomination by then. Instead, arrogant and incompetent, they left the organizing advantage to Obama, who has actually run a 50-state campaign.

All of this is true. And yet, after her death-defying victories in Ohio (by a comfortable 12 points) and, even more surprisingly, Texas (by a narrow but clean 4 points), Hillary Clinton has joined her husband as the Harry Houdini of American politics. Sadly for Democrats, her strategy has predictably involved going negative; Republicans may well use it as a manual for how to neutralize Obama if he does win the Democratic nomination. The last big state on the primary calendar, Pennsylvania (with 158 delegates), votes on

April 22nd; its demography is similar to Ohio, with lots of working class voters who tend to favor Clinton over Obama. What all this means, is that this amazing race is far from over.

Winning at All Costs

Hillary Clinton's campaign staff saved her in Ohio and Texas by employing what they called "the kitchen sink strategy:" try everything and above all throw everything (including, presumably the sink) at Obama and hope you can throw him off his stride.

It worked. Reaching back into the past, the Clinton campaign hired an advertising team that had helped clinch the nomination for Walter Mondale over another young upstart, Gary Hart, in 1984. Drawing on the image of a red phone ringing at 3am; a voice gravely intones, "Who do you want to answer the call in the middle of the night, when your children are safe and asleep?" The older version of the ad doomed Hart, who like Obama was a largely unknown quantity, suggesting the world is simply too dangerous to elect an untested figure to the presidency (ironically former Senator Hart has had a distinguished retirement as a foreign policy sage). The current ad finally connected the Clinton chief argument for her campaign with real voters: she may be unlovable, but she's dependable; Obama may be the coolest kid in school but he dangerously does not have much of a record.

It did not help that the Clinton people dug out the fact (presumably to coincide with the ad campaign) that though Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on NATO operations in Afghanistan, Obama has yet to chair a single hearing on the matter. Mentioning in another ad that Clinton would never let running for President interfere with her defending the country, the Senator skillfully pointed both to the thinness of Obama's Senate resume and to fears that he may be a lightweight on foreign policy issues; doubtless the Republicans duly took note of this strategy.

Obama's people did not help themselves by saying one thing to the people of Ohio about trade issues (three-quarters of Ohioans mentioned in exit-polling that free trade has cost the state more jobs than it created), and another to the government of Canada. Both Clinton and Obama have stressed their skepticism about free trade to a Democratic Party that is increasingly protectionist at its base. The faltering American economy emerged as the number one issue for voters in both Texas and Ohio; both candidates fell over themselves in denouncing NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement), which economically pulls Mexico, the U.S., and Canada together.

Sadly for Obama, while he was beginning to gain traction attacking Senator Clinton over NAFTA (after all, it is considered one of the major political accomplishments of her husband's presidency), a memo emerged which put him on the defensive. A senior Obama economic advisor had met with representatives of the Canadian government, and, according to the notes of one of the participants, told the Canadians not to believe the rhetoric on trade that Obama was peddling in Ohio; that it was all a matter of "political positioning." The advisor angrily denounced the characterization, but the damage was done. So much of Obama's appeal lies in being seen as a fresh face, a silver-tongued orator who means what he says, and will change the two-faced nature and cynicism of Washington politics. But here, he seemed to be indulging in just the sort of maneuver that so many Americans are so sick of.

Questioning Obama's fitness to deal with foreign affairs, and putting him on the defensive over NAFTA (it also didn't help that an early patron of Obama in Chicago, Tony Rezko, went on trial for corruption this week) seems to have done the trick; exit polls in both Ohio and Texas show that the vast majority of undecided voters broke for Clinton late in the day. In the short run, going negative worked (though again Obama certainly did not help his cause). Where does the race go from here?

Clinton's Math Problem

However, time is running out, even for the ever-resilient Clinton team. There are only 11 primaries and caucuses left; there is no conceivable way that Clinton can emerge from the process with more pledged delegates than Obama. At present, Obama has around 1477 delegates while Clinton has in the neighborhood of 1391; 2025 are needed to win the race (this number precludes Texas caucus results that will probably favor Obama). Given the ridiculous Democratic system of awarding delegates proportionally (it resembles nothing so much as the French 4th Republic), Hillary simply does not have enough contests left to catch up. But neither is it likely Obama will win enough pledged delegates to gain the nomination cleanly. The greatest irony of them all is that despite all this democratic participation there is now little doubt the race will be decided by the superdelegates, unelected Democratic functionaries. We have gone through all this merely to go back to the “smoke-filled rooms” of the 19th century, when American political bosses sometimes swayed conventions to do their bidding.

But, of course, times are very different. It is hard to see the superdelegates ignoring the wishes of the majority of their voters (there literally could be riots in the streets); rather they are likely to ratify the wishes of the party.

That leaves the Clinton campaign with only one valid argument. If she can win the majority of the races left,

keeping the momentum, there is just a chance she finishes the primary season with more voter support than Obama. At present, counting the disputed Florida result, around 13.1 million people have voted for Obama, with 12.8 million voting for Clinton. Let's see—a race where one candidate had the majority of delegates and the other won a majority of the voters—welcome back to the ghost of the 2000 presidential campaign!

In such circumstances, with Obama faltering, Clinton could (just) claim that only she could save the party from yet another disastrous defeat; there are plenty of Democrats still running around who think George W. Bush “stole” the election from Al Gore, so the popular vote really matters. But the early March results are a nightmare for the Democratic Party establishment. In terms of money, of enthusiasm, and of turnout this remains their election to lose. But, given the insanity of the voting system, it is still conceivable that the Democrats snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.



John C. Hulsman, Ph. D., <hulsman@dgap.org>, is the Alfred von Oppenheim Scholar in Residence at the German Council on Foreign Relations. He has informally advised a leading candidate for president.