

The Performance of Politics Election 2012

Posted: 09/19/2012 5:25 pm

In the wake of the party conventions, the shape of the presidential contest has crystallized. Shocking to pundits and purveyors of conventional wisdom, Barack Obama has stretched his lead, narrowly in the national polls, more decisively in the critical swing states. Campaigns are all about hope and bluff. Though "no one will hear a discouraging word" from the Romney campaign, the writing is on the wall. The reason is not the actual state of the economy or nation. It's about the state of our political drama, our symbolic and emotional selves.

From the Greeks and American Founding Fathers to modern political scientists, democracy has been misunderstood as an exercise in rationality. Voters are portrayed as employing unencumbered intellects, as looking at issues and weighing their interests, as having the ability to understand "truth" and see through the "distortions" of the other side. But this simply isn't the way society works.

Voters do not decide whom to vote for by weighing their objective costs and benefits. They are not calculating machines, but emotional and moral human beings. Searching for the meanings of things, they want to make sense of political life, working out a grand narrative of where we've been, where we are now, and where we're going in the future.

Candidates are characters in this social drama, casting themselves as heroic protagonists and opponents as wearing black hats. Citizen-audiences evaluate these shape-shifting performances, making identifications, not calculations. They support characters that seem life-affirming and hopeful, and oppose those who appear evil and dangerous.

Those auditioning for presidential power aim to become collective representations, symbols that embody the best qualities of citizens and the nation. If a candidate succeeds in symbolizing "America" for enough voters, he'll be allowed to control the nation's highest office.

In 2008, Barack Obama created a truly inspiring character that compelled mass identification. In the first two years of his presidency, the emotional fusion binding this character to the left and center became attenuated. In some part such loosening was inevitable. The symbolic intensity of Obama-character could not possibly be sustained as Obama-President manipulated the machinery of government.

There were also self-inflicted wounds. Obama's political autobiography was all about healing the polarizing wounds of the '60s, but he deeply underestimated the difficulty of creating a vital center inside Congress. During the year-long health care debate, post-partisan compromise was demonstrated to be only a figment of the president's imagination. He came away empty-handed, without a shred of Republican support. While Obama-character played the fiddle of reconciliation, the Tea Party made America burn. "Obama" now seemed cool and out of touch, and later acknowledged neglecting narrative for policy. The Republicans smashed the Democrats in 2010.

After that cathartic triumph, the emotional energy of millions of angry, disappointed Americans seemed there for the Republicans to take. They had only to find a vessel to hold it. Failing to rise to this dramaturgical moment, the Republicans emerged from their primary with a cipher, not a symbol. Mitt Romney possessed a mile long CV and a well-oiled political machine, but nary a drop of charisma. He sees himself as a tool, not a vessel, an instrument of economic management rather than a vehicle for emotional and moral representation.

Instead of symbolizing, Romney performs the role of the problem-solving businessman. But voters wrap practical promises inside gauzy cultural blankets. What matters is what citizens can feel, the character of the candidate and his story. They can't scientifically evaluate the validity of his promises. Is candidate Romney one of us? Is he an up-from-the-bootstraps, self-made American hero, like Johnson, Nixon, or Clinton? Is he a warrior hero like Ike or Bush? Is he an aristocratic hero sacrificing personal comfort to work for the American people, like Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, or JFK?

It doesn't matter who Mitt Romney actually is, only what his character seems to be. With Obama's help, Romney-character emerged as Bain "Capitalist," the quarter-billionaire who won't tell us about his taxes and parked his hidden money offshore. Romney may have brain power, but he lacks symbolic soul. His character signifies self over community, a glad hander who'll tell us what we want to hear, not what he deeply believes.

Obama-character presents a sharp contrast. Whatever his practical failings, he is still seen as idealistic and honest, devoted to helping others rather than feathering his own nest. The plot which this admirable character has inhabited, however, has terribly let us down. The 2008 campaign was poetry in motion, a hero promising salvation; President Obama governed in prose, with no relief in sight.

Would Americans see Obama as a good-hearted flop? The RNC performance team would have had it so. The dramaturgical challenge for DNC organizers was shifting the chronology so that Obama could be a hero again. The new narrative saw Obama as inheriting, not creating, our awful economic mess. "750,000 jobs were lost in January 2008 alone!" was in Bill Clinton's speech. No human being could have done a better job, he assured us. And in his acceptance speech, the president proclaimed we are only in the middle of the recovery, a story of suffering that will not be redeemed for several more years. But then there will be salvation, and American greatness will be restored.

The bounce from the DNC indicates Obama-character regained some traction with the center and suggests some re-fusion with the activist left. At least for now, Obama can no longer be a hero, but he can be represented as working heroically for our side.

Over the next 48 days, opportunities for performative failure and success remain -- most conspicuously in the presidential debates, where ritual and dramaturgy, not rational argument will reign. There will also be unscripted events that can catch a character by surprise. During the financial crisis in September, 2008, John McCain seemed to fall off the stage.

At this point in the "Performance of Politics 2012," all signs point to the success of the Democratic play. Victory is not in the economic stars, but in our symbolic selves.