

The Credibility Gap

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It was, you may recall, a truism of the campaign that Barack Obama did not have the experience to “lead”, while Hillary Clinton and John McCain clearly did. This was a difficult point to argue against politically — voters knew that John McCain and Hillary Clinton had been in government and on TV for many years and looked old and respected, while Barack Obama looked young and new. And yet, the exact opposite was true: Barack Obama was the only one of the three who was a competent leader.

This was seen, foremost, in the management of their campaigns. Hillary Clinton’s campaign consisted of friends and loyalists, each with poorly-defined job titles, who took every opportunity to attack their coworkers for their own benefit. (“It was a terribly unpleasant place to work,” [explained](#) a Clinton staffer. “You had seven people on a morning call, all of whom had tried to get someone else on the call fired, or knew someone on the call tried to get them fired. It was not a recipe for cohesive team building.”)

Spending was out of control, the campaign lurched from message to message, and her senior advisors were woefully ill-advised. (Top campaign strategist Mark Penn, who didn’t even quit his day job as CEO of the most notorious corporate public relations and unionbusting firm, didn’t even know that states awarded delegates proportionally.) Bill kept interfering, backchanneling with staffers and giving speeches without clearance, while Hillary got angry and threw fits.

This shouldn’t have been a surprise. [As far back as 2004](#), Brad DeLong was trying to talk people out of supporting Hillary for President, based on her total failure at health care reform in 1993/4. His explanation is worth quoting at length:

[W]hen senior members of the economic team said that key senators like Daniel Patrick Moynihan would have this-and-that objection, she told them they were disloyal. When junior members of the economic team told her that the Congressional Budget Office would say such-and-such, she told them (wrongly) that her conversations with CBO head Robert Reischauer had already fixed that. When long-time senior hill staffers told her that she was making a dreadful mistake by fighting with rather than reaching out to John Breaux and Jim Cooper, she told them that they did not understand the wave of popular political support the bill would generate. And when substantive objections were raised to the plan by analysts calculating the moral hazard and adverse selection pressures it would put on the nation’s health-care system...

Hillary fans later tried to assure him that she had change, but this campaign seems to have borne out his original estimation.

John McCain's campaign consisted of extremists pulled from Bush's entourage and beyond, who pressured the candidate into compromising his instincts, policies, and principles. Used to running small, personal insurgent campaigns, he let his Bush-backed campaign advisors spend money on huge offices and ad buys meant to convey a sense of inevitability. (It didn't work — the Bush base never contributed the money needed to pay for it all and it was largely scrapped when the campaign went bankrupt.)

His policy advisors came not just from the Bush team, but from the gamma quadrant. When McCain slipped up and said he wouldn't meet with Latin American dictators like the President of Spain, McCain's foreign policy advisor insisted this wasn't a gaffe — that McCain wasn't planning to meet with the man who pulled his troops out of Iraq. On health care, the centerpiece of their plan was to raise the price of insurance so that people wouldn't buy so much. On the economy — well, on the economy McCain seemed to announce a new plan every day. He canceled his campaign and flew to Washington to demand a meeting with the President on the bailout bill, but when, in the meeting, he was asked what his position was, he stormed out of the room. When the bill came to the floor, he took credit for putting it together. When it failed, he took credit for making sure it didn't pass. When a modified version passed, he took credit for that too. And in the debates, he seemed to announce new programs off-the-cuff, like one plan to have the government buy up all bad mortgages directly.

His management was similarly erratic. He liked to call staffers directly with ideas, in a subversive attempt to overthrow his own chain of command. He liked running his mouth off to the press and had to be restrained by his own staffers. Indeed, his whole campaign seemed like a struggle between two aspects of his personality. One knew what he had to do to win and put structures in place to do it, the other wasn't so big on winning and tried to subvert those same structures.

When a spokesperson, Jill Hazelbaker, called Obama's trip overseas a "campaign rally" and "one giant photo opportunity", McCain told the press he disagreed and would speak to her about it. Upset, Hazelbaker refused to come into work or return McCain's phone calls. His campaign manager told him he [had to apologize](#) to his spokesperson. Isn't it supposed to work the other way around? Then again, it does kind of explain why McCain addressed a group of supporters as "[my fellow prisoners](#)".

Barack Obama was a serious contrast. He picked the most experienced and talented staffers from the past Democratic campaigns. With a deft understanding of how to manage large, volunteer organizations from his days as a community organizer, he gave them clear roles and managed them effectively. With millions of volunteers around the country, he built what was probably one of the largest

organizations in the country, and the whole thing went off like clockwork, with everyone having clear, achievable goals and being held accountable for meeting them — despite the vast majority of them being unpaid volunteers!

When it came to policy, he put together advisory teams on each topic that contained leading experts from a variety of perspectives and tried to synthesize a coherent and centrist policy from each of them. The results were not perfect, but they were far more detailed and thoughtful than anyone expected from a Presidential candidate and tend to impress policy experts. (Compare this to their usual reaction to campaign material which is to hide their eyes and insist “well, (s)he really doesn’t mean it.”)

His team had a strategy and message and, for the most part, stuck with it, despite the usual fluctuations and setbacks. People weren’t capriciously fired (with the exception of foreign policy advisor Samantha Powers, who was axed for calling Hillary “a monster”) or reshuffled. They did their jobs and they did them well. “No drama Obama” was the slogan and they carried it out — no big changes or fights or leaks.

His transition has shown a similar preparedness and focus. He immediately assembled a council of varied and respected advisors on the financial crisis and later other topics. (Although at times the teams’ membership criteria can be puzzling.) One member of his team talks to the public (through Sunday show interviews and YouTube videos), while a website keeps everyone up-to-date. His staff does a thorough review of each candidate’s background and each agency’s operations. His team is even reviewing every Bush executive order to see which ones need to be overturned.

No doubt he will be a similar president: a competent manager, surrounded by effective and experienced people, all trying to do good things without fuss. The only remaining questions — remaining, clearly, because the answers haven’t been decided yet — are who those people will be and what good things they will carry out.