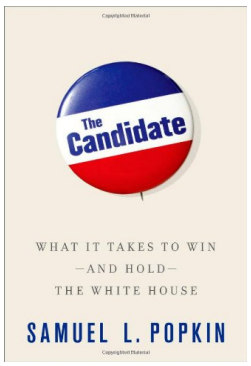

The Candidate

What It Takes to Win – and Hold – the White House

by Samuel L. Popkin
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360 pages

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Take-Aways

- US presidential candidates who seem destined to win often don't.
- To win the White House, you must succeed at three endeavors:
- First, you must convince voters that you understand them and their struggles.
- Second, you must present a vision for how your election will benefit the nation.
- Third, you must head a well-run, highly functional campaign; it foreshadows your ability to serve as America's chief executive.
- The "message box" is a tool candidates use to focus their image and communications, and to position themselves in relation to their opponents.
- Presidential candidates join the race as "challengers," "incumbents" or "successors."
- Each type of candidate requires a different campaign strategy.
- You must be able to shift strategy seamlessly when outside forces demand it.
- As imperfect as this process is, the American presidential primary election usually yields the best candidates.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Importance	Innovation	Style
9	**9**	**8**	**9**

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How US presidential candidates win elections, 2) Why certain candidates won while others lost and 3) How some thwarted their campaigns.

Recommendation

Just in time for the 2012 US presidential election – and its inevitable postmortems – political scientist Samuel L. Popkin provides his take on past White House campaigners and explains why some succeeded while others failed. Popkin succinctly lays out the three major assignments that a presidential candidate must fulfill during this arduous campaign: Be one of the people, present a vision and run a well-managed campaign. A candidate who doesn't measure up on all three counts, Popkin says, will never get the keys to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue (or perhaps win any other political race, so his advice applies, in part, beyond the US or the presidential campaign). The only blot on this entertaining read is the occasional misspelling or transposition of famous names – but Popkin's observations are so engaging that you probably will forgive him. *getAbstract* thinks political junkies will find this a page-turner, but, thanks to Popkin's conversational and accessible style, so will anyone who cares about the democratic process anywhere. Winston Churchill allegedly said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the rest." But perhaps a different piece of Churchillian wisdom applies: "Politics are almost as exciting as war, and quite as dangerous."

Summary

The Unexpected Winners and Losers

"There are two winners in every presidential election campaign: the inevitable winner when it begins and the inevitable victor after it ends."

Conventional wisdom often holds that the US presidential candidate with the biggest bank account, the most allies and the most ardent followers will blaze an easy trail to the White House. Reality is different. Observers assumed New York governor Thomas Dewey would be a sure winner over President Harry S. Truman in 1948; 60 years later, in 2008, New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and US senator Hillary Clinton were shoo-ins to win their parties' respective nominations and duke it out for 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But it didn't pan out that way; these candidates made important strategic errors that undermined their campaigns.

Presidential candidates arrive at the podium in three incarnations: "Challengers" try to depose the opposite party's chief executive, "incumbents" vie for second terms and "successors" try to maintain their party's power. Politicians who are ambitious for the White House frequently emulate winning efforts, but they might find better guidance if they scrutinize losing races and understand which type of campaign – challenger, incumbent or successor – they must undertake.

Candidates "are on the biggest stage in the world, handling three jobs at once. And they cannot fail at any single one of the three and win."

As a presidential candidate, you must realize three crucial goals: 1) Assure voters you are just like them and can relate to their challenges and struggles, 2) share a vision for America and 3) manage your campaign well, thus demonstrating that you "can command the ship of state." Failure in any of these will ensure defeat. To reach the White House, you also must achieve the following goals:

- **"Create a public identity"** – This is your brand. It includes your record and family.
- **"Develop a vision for the future"** – And convince voters to join in it.

"Authenticity is a claim, not a fact, and the candidate must persuade people the claim is true."

- **"Preside over the campaign"** – You are the CEO of your campaign. Know what you must undertake yourself and what you can afford to delegate.
- **Be "consistent and coherent"** – Keep your three tasks in sync. Any conflicts will become visible to voters, leading them to see you as inauthentic.
- **"Plan for chaos"** – Nothing will occur exactly as you have planned or predicted.

Boxed In

To stay focused and aligned as a presidential candidate, use a tool called a "message box," which contains the following four sections:

1. How you characterize yourself as a candidate.
2. How you portray your rival.
3. How your opponent will characterize him- or herself.
4. How your rival will describe you.

"Nothing makes a candidate look more heroic than choosing the right enemy."

In presenting yourself, determine what to gloss over and what to highlight. This is "positioning." Define your relationship to your political party: Do you toe the line or break from the pack? When describing your rival, attempt to diminish his or her record and goals. Portraying opponents as inconsistent on the issues is a perennial ploy. When your rival attacks you, you can "push back," "attack the attack" or "push the envelope," a tactic in which you refuse to retreat from a declared goal and deride the criticism as a facade.

Your message box offers a blueprint of your campaign strategy, but it is only a guide. Many factors can cause a campaign to go awry, such as sudden, dynamic news events or challenges arising from the new media. Such unpredictable elements call for campaigns to be as streamlined and efficient as possible. In 1992, the Bill Clinton team created and perfected the "war room" model of operations to help ensure that the campaign could always muster a rapid response and stay "on message." Campaigns have sought to replicate the war room ever since.

"Audacity, experience, followers and money are just the entry ticket. No one wins who cannot adjust strategy and stay on course."

The Challenger: Can Opposition Party Contenders Get an Upper Hand?

Voters seek contradictory traits in a candidate challenging a sitting president. They want the challenger to be unblemished by "inside-the-Beltway" [the expressway that encircles Washington, D.C.] problems and yet be able to tackle immediately what Washington insiders cannot solve. They want "an experienced virgin." As a challenger, make sure your conduct aligns with your beliefs and distance yourself from the "partisan battles" of the day. You also need to deftly negotiate the messages of "hope and change": You must inspire disillusioned voters while clearly showing how you intend to bring about change.

"No one on a senator's staff asks a senator why he wants to be president. And it may not dawn on them that ordinary people will find that question crucial."

Fervent fans can place a challenger on a pedestal, inviting rivals to exaggerate the candidate's personal foibles. If you are a challenger, don't behave as if you are entitled to win. Be aware of "parochialism": Appeal to the goals of varying "ethnic, religious, economic and cultural" groups by performing "cultural triangulation" – taking on their interests as your own. If your prior positions have become ineffective or out of date, publicly amend your past or shift your approach. Challengers also can ally themselves with various constituent groups by sharing enemies: When Bill Clinton criticized the entertainer Sister Souljah, white voters offended by her rap music decided he was not in thrall to his African-American base.

The three kinds of presidential challengers are: 1) "senators," who are influential inside Washington but not necessarily outside it, and whose records can be minefields to cross in any presidential run; 2) "governors," who have the advantage of being elected

"executives" and who are unencumbered by votes in Congress; and 3) "heroes," who have excellent name recognition but who need to demonstrate that they can tackle difficulties outside their spheres of influence.

"Every president believes people know more about what he has done than they do."

Senator Barack Obama was Hillary Clinton's main rival for the 2008 Democratic nomination. Seasoned political observers viewed Clinton, a challenger, as nearly unbeatable due to her celebrity, campaign war chest and army of endorsers. Yet she didn't win, for several reasons:

- Although Clinton won the New Hampshire primary [a preliminary election in which each party selects its candidate], the Obama team much more efficiently concentrated on amassing delegates, particularly in the states that hold caucuses, where Democratic and Republican delegates vote in meetings to name their party's nominee.
- Clinton positioned herself as "an experienced insider" to reach swing voters she would need in the general election, while Obama concentrated on new voters, on winning the Iowa caucuses and on positioning himself as the alternative to Clinton.
- Obama laid groundwork in Iowa early on; Clinton focused on it too late.
- Clinton emphasized "discrete programs and policies" to entice various groups of voters, while Obama had an "overarching theme" that worked well in a "change election" year.
- The goal of Clinton's message box was to communicate her competence. The goal of Obama's message box was "to make change more important than experience."
- The Obama team used the Internet more resourcefully, especially in fundraising.
- Infighting plagued the Clinton campaign. Obama's team was disciplined.

"Ronald Reagan learned what all actors know: There are always at least two audiences – the one inside the theater and the one who will read about the performance or see it elsewhere."

The Incumbent: Is It Good to Be King?

Incumbent presidents face a new set of obstacles when running for a second term. Since they ran a competent campaign to get elected the first time, they tend to "fight the last war." Instead, they must pivot from attacking to defending. President Jimmy Carter was unprepared to answer Ronald Reagan's attacks on his record. But Carter was not unique; commanders in chief live in a rarified atmosphere and tend to believe the American people think as they do.

"It takes many more months for an incumbent to develop a credible defense of a half-full glass than it takes a challenger to remind people that the president promised to fill the half-empty glass all the way."

While sitting presidents have the advantages of the Oval Office, they have its encumbrances, too, including bureaucracy and delegated responsibilities. Incumbents must change their message box to focus on persuading the public to stay the course rather than taking a chance on an untried challenger. External events can pose problems as well as opportunities. Richard Nixon was able to change the national conversation with his trip to China; George W. Bush gained great political advantage as Americans rallied around him following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

"Every politician who gets in trouble thinks it's how they're saying things instead of what they're saying." (political adviser Paul Begala)

Harry S. Truman is an outstanding example of an incumbent president who successfully fended off a strong challenger, Thomas E. Dewey. Truman assembled a trusted team, engaged in long-range preparation and was ready to respond nimbly to attacks. He handled his multiple challenges well, though his policy makers and re-election staff did not always agree, let alone cooperate.

George H. W. Bush's electoral fate went the other way: He coasted into his re-election year appearing invincible and still lost. While his foreign-policy accomplishments were impressive, Bush had neglected the domestic side. He angered Republicans by breaking his 1988 "no new taxes" vow. In the campaign, he faced a primary challenge from the

right wing and had to battle third-party candidate Pat Buchanan in the general election, all while dealing with the legacy of the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra scandal. The country was in no mood for an incumbent. Bill Clinton defeated the first President Bush primarily because Clinton cast the race as a referendum on the economy. His message box remained focused, while the Bush operation struggled with internal squabbles. Bush made the error of assuming foreign-policy successes would win the day. He had not planned for Clinton's carefully orchestrated attacks.

"Candidates are made, not born, and they are made by the team that they – and only they – can build."

The Successor: How Should You Follow the Leader?

George H.W. Bush was the only incumbent vice president to win the White House in more than 150 years. Nixon and Hubert Humphrey both lost. [Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson were vice presidents, but they became presidents when their successors died, so they campaigned as incumbent presidents.] So the odds were against vice president Al Gore in 2000. He suffered from the lack of an individual identity and the lingering effects of Clinton's impeachment scandal. Gore cast himself as a stalwart, credible leader to contrast with Republican George W. Bush. Gore made history by choosing running mate Sen. Joseph Lieberman, the first Jewish member on a national ticket. Gore also attempted to increase his likability by dramatically kissing his wife, Tipper, on the stage at the Democratic convention.

"Political elites still think about victory more than about qualifications to be a good president."

However, the Bush campaign was well prepared for Gore's attacks. Lieberman gave a lackluster performance against Dick Cheney in the vice presidential debate. And Gore's stiff, professorial demeanor during his debates with Bush eclipsed any advantage his experience gave him.

The Team's the Thing

Whether a challenger, incumbent or successor, a presidential candidate must assemble an outstanding, agile, resilient team. The candidate and the team must understand that the complex problems they face during an election have no simple answers. Teams should include a "strong chief of staff" as the central clearinghouse for important matters; a "peer" who can tell the candidate hard truths when no one else can; an "objective navigator," usually a pollster, who provides the campaign with crucial information; a "body man" to take care of the candidate's personal needs; "mediators" to calm disputes and soothe ruffled feathers; and an "alter ego" who will help keep the candidate's brand intact. Nancy Reagan was an effective alter ego to her husband, whose Hollywood film-crew experiences taught him the value of well-organized teams.

"The most important quality we should look for in candidates is whether they understand the distinction between what sells and what works. Both are necessary; knowing the difference is critical."

For Better or for Worse

Is the American electoral system a good one? Does it yield highly qualified candidates for the most important position in the nation? The answers are probably yes. The long, arduous primary process weeds out candidates with weaknesses in organization, messaging or biography. Modern media require candidates to educate themselves on a much broader swath of issues than campaigners had to know in the past. And primaries and caucuses make candidates defend their positions and their records. For all these reasons, the modern US political process is superior to the "smoke-filled rooms" of old.

About the Author

Elections expert **Samuel L. Popkin** is a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego.