



Book The Audacity to Win

The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory

David Plouffe
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Recommendation

President Barack Obama’s historic political campaign deserves to be studied for its innovative organization, volunteer effort, fundraising and use of technology. But it is also a compelling story about an unlikely candidate and the highly motivated expert team that pulled off one of the greatest game-changing upsets in U.S. political history. Obama campaign manager David Plouffe (rhymes with “bluff”) has written a diary-like firsthand account that delivers insights and perspectives previously known only to insiders. While he tells his story chronologically, the suspense builds as internal and external opponents battle and fall by the wayside. *BooksInShort* recommends this engrossing David-and-Goliath story to leaders, political aficionados, technology and media buffs, and anyone interested in overcoming huge odds to become a winner.

Take-Aways

- In 2008, Barack Obama garnered seven million more votes in the popular election than any other presidential candidate in history.
- Organizers built his campaign around grass-roots volunteers, who raised money, recruited more volunteers and created the Obama buzz via word-of-mouth.
- From its inception, the campaign used the Internet to raise money and awareness. It interacted with supporters, posted videos and conducted social media outreach.
- Letting voters have direct access to Obama when possible boosted the campaign.
- To prepare for the Iowa caucuses, the Obama campaign aggressively hired more people and set to work earlier than any other presidential campaign.
- Obama disliked distilling complex answers into 30-second sound bites.
- The Obama staff saw John McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin as a vice presidential candidate as “a reckless stunt” and believed that McCain had become “impulsive.”
- Obama won additional support from voters who saw the choice of Palin as insulting.
- The campaign succeeded due to its electoral strategy and consistent message.
- Governor Tim Kaine and Senators Joe Biden and Evan Bayh were on Obama’s final list of possible vice presidents.

Summary

The Audacity of Obama

Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign could be the most unlikely winning effort in U.S. political history. Not only did Obama – a one-term U.S. senator with only four years in the Illinois Senate – beat Hillary Clinton for the nomination, he defeated veteran Senator John McCain to become president, earning seven million

more votes than any candidate in history.

“The remarkable Obama for President campaign, led by a once-in-a-generation candidate, had the audacity to win – and not just to win, but to do so with guts, defying conventional wisdom time and again.”

This success was not automatic. In fact, supporters pressed Obama into becoming a presidential candidate as the result of the exceptional reaction to his book *The Audacity of Hope* as well as increased demands, starting in 2006, for him to make speeches to support Democratic candidates nationwide. As recognition grew, Obama offered an alternative to President George W. Bush’s unpopular policies. Momentum climbed as the 2006 mid-term elections gave Democrats control of the Senate and generated the party’s first U.S. House sweep in 12 years.

“We talked to voters like adults and organized a grass-roots movement of average citizens the likes of which American politics had never seen.”

Voters clearly wanted change. The question was how much. That answer was crucial, since an Obama candidacy would have to derive its energy from the voters’ demand for a clean break from the past. To gauge his chances for success, Obama hired veteran politicians David Axelrod, Robert Gibbs and author David Plouffe. These experts set up headquarters in Chicago to avoid D.C.’s insider thinking and gossip mongering. They designed a grass-roots volunteer campaign to make it easier to raise donations, recruit support and create word-of-mouth buzz. They focused on the Internet as a then-groundbreaking channel for raising money and building awareness and support. From the onset, they designed Obama’s Web site for social interaction. They set an initial fundraising goal of \$50 million versus Hillary Clinton’s expected \$110 million. Obama’s team raised the funds to run solidly in the first four primary states. If he won, he would need more.

“Unfortunately, you can’t just say you’re running and have everything fall into place.”

Barack Obama agonized over whether to run, weighing personal, family and career issues. Once he made the final decision, Obama recorded a teaser video in January 2007, listing the reasons he was considering a presidential bid. This test of the campaign’s new technology became extremely popular on YouTube and on the campaign’s Web site. Obama launched his drive for the nomination on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois, on the site where Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous “House Divided” speech.

Getting Organized

Now, the campaign’s leaders had to set up logistics, recruit pivotal staff and get organized. The campaign’s departmental structure included operations, finance, scheduling and advance work, press and communications, new media, opposition research, information technology, polling and paid-media, state-by-state operations and outreach, including extensive relationship building with elected officials, constituency leaders and volunteers. The strategists made several decisions that helped Obama win, including:

- **Organizing departments hierarchically** — Staffers reported to department heads. This made managers accountable and instilled discipline.
- **Setting salary caps for campaign positions** — Only one person made more than \$12,000 monthly and no one received a raise, except with a promotion. This streamlined salary negotiations and saved precious time.
- **Giving technology and Web-development teams strategic positions** — The digital teams included key people recruited from Orbitz, Google and Howard Dean’s campaign.
- **Charging the central staff with backing up the field staff** — The campaign focused on supporting people on the ground working to generate primary and caucus votes state by state.

“It started and ended in Iowa. If we did not win there, our chances were probably zero.”

As the campaigning progressed, volunteer efforts strengthened. By March 2007, 450,000 people volunteered via the Internet. E-mail campaigns garnered support and donations as Internet tracking provided crucial data on voting, social networking, contribution patterns and caucus memberships. This helped managers formulate new, effective campaign tactics, such as expanding the fundraising base to the grass-roots level by staging \$25-per-person “citizen fund-raisers.” Obama-campaign insiders broadcast live, streaming videos of their strategy sessions to fascinated supporters. Direct communication soon became a powerful tool. By April 3, 2007, the campaign had raised \$26 million, \$3 million more than Clinton, proving that she was not invincible and invigorating the Obama campaign as it moved into the Iowa caucuses.

The Iowa Marathon

That month, the campaign entered its next phase, though the first primaries were still 10 months away. Staffers developed more sophisticated policies, expanded grass-roots organizing and prepared for the Democratic candidate debates. Not yet a strong debater, Obama disliked the process of distilling complex answers into 30-second responses. Audiences frequently favored him over Clinton, demonstrating that he was making a direct connection with voters.

“It was clear that we would win Iowa only on the backs of Independents, Republicans, young voters and new registrants — a scary proposition, to say the least.”

The campaign aggressively hired more people and set to work earlier in Iowa than any other presidential effort in history. To keep his young-adult volunteer organizers motivated, Obama met with them personally. By combining a grass-roots approach with Web technology, the campaign drew one million volunteers (one-quarter of whom made donations) by June, three months ahead of schedule. The volunteers wanted as much information as possible, so staffers and Michelle and Barack Obama wrote a variety of e-mails, long and short, formal and informal. The campaign’s “state of the race” e-mails and online video updates proved highly popular. Its overriding Iowa strategy was to manage every detail and it worked with stunning results: On January 3, 2008, Obama beat John Edwards and Clinton by eight points. The campaign had spent two years preparing for the election, half of that time in Iowa. Victory confirmed what experts already knew — that great fundraising makes everything else possible — and it taught insiders that:

- A motivated grass-roots organization that could take initiative is a very powerful tool.

- Contrary to tradition, young supporters will vote in the same numbers as older voters.
- The discipline to follow a steady course emerged from the campaign's consistent electoral strategy and its message that the need for change trumps experience.
- New age, creative techniques worked when staffers executed them flawlessly.
- Letting voters have direct access to Obama when possible boosted the campaign.

From New Hampshire to Super Tuesday

Later that month, the New Hampshire primary brought a surprise. Hillary Clinton broke down answering an emotional question. Teary-eyed, she said her self-sacrifice was nothing compared to what the country needed. It turned the tide. Obama lost the state by a few thousand votes, shaking the campaign's competent image, but not breaking its stride.

“Our strong strategic sense was that Hillary Clinton had to be disrupted early in the primary season for us to have any real chance of derailing her.”

In the contentious South Carolina race, the Clinton campaign went on the attack to try to beat Obama decisively. His campaign created “truth squads” to rebut distortions and accusations, and he won with 55% of the vote – including 25% of the white vote. The January 26 win repudiated Clinton's negative campaign and set the stage for the Super Tuesday primaries which began on February 5 in 22 states with 1,681 delegates at stake. Sensing the shift in momentum, Senator Ted Kennedy and his niece Caroline Kennedy (daughter of President John F. Kennedy) endorsed Obama in late January.

“Throughout the campaign whenever we embraced risk, we were rewarded, a lesson that eventually became a touchstone when making hard decisions.”

Obama was polling more than 20 points behind in many of the Super Tuesday races. He stuck to his message and never wavered, earning more volunteers, donations and high-level endorsements. When Super Tuesday came, Obama won only 15 fewer delegates than Clinton. Analysts widely considered this a victory and, for the first time, the campaign felt the sharp reality that Obama could be the next Democratic presidential nominee.

“Controversy or not, it was clear that Sarah Palin was a meteor the likes of which had not crossed the political sky in some time.”

After February 10, the campaign shifted from representing the underdog to promoting the cautious front-runner. Then, Clinton unexpectedly won the Ohio and Texas primaries, gaining a four-delegate advantage. In May, Al Gore and John Edwards endorsed Obama. Now the pre-convention campaign effort focused on gaining the majority of the overall 4,419 Democratic convention delegates, including winning enough “superdelegates.” Obama needed about 100 of these party leaders and former elected officials to reach the number of delegates required to win the nomination. Despite Clinton's last-minute maneuvers for delegates, Obama scored the majority. ABC News was the first to identify him as the nominee.

“Thanks to the grass-roots network we had built, we could communicate through any means and have a conversation with any voter.”

Clinton's June 7 concession speech was magnanimous, but her campaign wanted the party and Obama to help raise funds to pay its \$20 million debt. The Obama campaign's leaders balked, especially since they now had to prepare for the expensive general election, focusing on swing voters in about 16 states. The campaign created statistical scenarios with an assortment of variables – independent voters, turnout, voter registrations, voting histories and demographics – to generate forecasts. Obama needed broad support; he could not let his effort hinge on winning any given state. This required an offensive strategy, focusing on keeping the states John Kerry had won four years earlier and winning some of the states that had gone to George W. Bush.

“Obama has a deeply practical, results-oriented streak – grounded in progressive values.”

In early June, the Obama team began vetting about 20 vice presidential candidates. While Obama considered Hillary Clinton viable, Axelrod and Plouffe thought Bill Clinton could be a liability. Insiders soon distilled the list to Virginia Governor Tim Kaine and Senators Joe Biden and Evan Bayh. On August 23, 2008, Obama announced that Biden was his choice. Obama made his acceptance speech to 80,000 people at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. With the ticket complete, the next goal was to defeat the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain.

Bringing It Home

Obama respected McCain, but was wary of the Republican Party's tough campaign tactics. The Democratic campaign was surprised by McCain's nomination of Sarah Palin, a national political novice despite being governor of Alaska, as his running mate. The Obama people called the selection “a reckless stunt” and felt later that McCain had become “erratic” and “impulsive.” McCain's poor choice bolstered Obama's candidacy. In her acceptance speech, Palin disparaged community organizers and appealed to Clinton supporters to vote for her simply because she was a woman. Both ideas fell flat. Palin's selection generated more Obama donations and volunteers.

“Obama often excised lines he thought were too political, overly simplistic or intellectually dishonest.”

By spring 2008, the economy had become the largest campaign issue. McCain fumbled when he called the economy fundamentally strong even as financial institutions were collapsing. This showed that he was out of touch and helped drive Obama's fundraising to a new level. He raised \$150 million in September, \$100 million of it online.

“When you make substantive decisions the right way, not based on polls and political wind gauging, you often end up on the high side of politics.”

The final phase of the campaign centered on the three debates between the presidential candidates and one between the vice presidential nominees. McCain moved to cancel the first debate in order to address the economic crisis, unexpectedly interrupting Obama's preparations. McCain said both candidates and bipartisan leaders should meet at the White House to formulate a financial rescue plan. But at the meeting, McCain seemed sullen and uninformed. It went poorly and did not produce a bailout proposal. Even after the meeting, McCain did not confirm that he would debate until the eleventh hour. Polls after the first debate on September 26, 2009, showed that Obama had won swing voters by focusing on how his policies would benefit the middle class. Sensing a turn in momentum, McCain pulled out of

Michigan, with 17 electoral votes at stake.

“Sometimes the quiet events that happen largely out of sight can have as much or more impact on the outcome of a campaign – or any endeavor — than the headline-grabbing moments.”

To maintain its winning momentum, the Obama campaign aired a 30-minute video featuring average Americans expressing their concerns about health care and the economy. The video, shown six days before the election, was very popular and subsequent newscasts about it kept McCain out of the spotlight. On election night, November 4, 2008, the Obama strategy played out as hoped. When he won Ohio and Pennsylvania, Barack Obama clinched the election. The unlikely candidate was now the 44th president of the United States.

About the Author

David Plouffe served as Dick Gephardt’s chief of staff, and managed three congressional races and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Plouffe and David Axelrod were the lead strategists on Barack Obama’s U.S. Senate bid. After managing Obama’s presidential run, Plouffe helped set up Organizing for America, a 13-million-person Obama-support organization.
