

# Ephemeral Candidates, Virtual Voters, and the Future of Retail Politics

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Political observers in the traditional early primary and caucus states—Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina—have long noted the importance of retail politics and grassroots organization in establishing the viability of nascent presidential campaigns. These activities have allowed candidates to vet a message, test staff, and establish a rapport with voters, in hopes of parlaying early victories into more money, broader national visibility, and greater momentum toward their party's nomination. Such has been the case for decades, and as a result, the presidential selection process typically has a cyclical rhythm that is both anticipated and familiar to political professionals of all stripes, as well as to voters actively engaged in the primary process in those states.

## Retail Traditions and New Political Imperatives

But for many New Hampshire political observers and voters alike, the recently concluded presidential primary cycle felt decidedly different than primaries past. Voters experienced a Republican horse race driven mainly by televised presidential debates, sporadic visits to the Granite State by many of the leading candidates, and a television ad war fueled by millions in unregulated super PAC money. In addition, smart phone apps, digital media, and social networking sites played a more central role in the provision of political information than ever before. These circumstances have raised legitimate questions about the future of the presidential selection process as it currently exists. We may be witnessing a fundamental transformation in how campaigns

and voters interact, with the rise of ephemeral candidates and virtual voters possibly redefining the role of retail politics for future presidential primary contests.

One might be tempted to blame a frontloaded schedule of primaries and caucuses for raising a new imperative that campaigns must cover a lot of ground quickly. It is true that scheduling issues were once again resolved in typically late fashion. But the fairly predictable scheduling outcome for the early contests gives credence to the notion that both parties experienced greater success in restoring order to the every-state-for-itself scheduling chaos. The campaigns were certainly thrown no particularly sharp calendar curveballs this time around.

The question facing social scientists, political observers and voters is whether the New Hampshire experience was an aberration due to the presence in the race of a quasi-favorite son candidate, part-time resident and former governor of neighboring Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, or whether a more fundamental reshaping of how candidates engage the presidential selection process is underway. If any of the other Republican hopefuls was deterred in competing for a New Hampshire Primary victory by Romney's relationship with the Granite State, that admission was never forthcoming. What was evident about this past primary cycle, however, was that never before have a succession of Republican presidential candidates generated so much momentum with so little grassroots organization or retail politicking underpinning their ephemeral success.

In reality, the retail politics experience has been in transition since at least the 2000 presidential election cycle, when the seeds of change were visible in the campaign of eventual winner, President George W. Bush.<sup>1</sup> From day one, the Bush organization built a national campaign from the top

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Berke, "McCain's Rise in New Hampshire Surprises Bush," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1999 <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/02/us/mccain-s-rise-in-new-hampshire-surprises-bush.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

down, with only limited recourse in New Hampshire to the decentralized traditions of retail politics and grassroots activity that typically characterize the process, and which were a staple of Arizona Senator John McCain's campaign.<sup>2</sup> This time, however, the Republican candidates seemed to ride national momentum longer than ever before, with little of the organizational structure that characterized the Bush campaign machine in 2000.

In doing so, each candidate was able to at least temporarily challenge Mitt Romney's status as the early frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination. Whether it was Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, Texas Governor Rick Perry, Atlanta businessman Herman Cain, or former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, each of these politicians had their moment in the sun as a potential frontrunner for the nomination, despite a palpable resignation among political professionals that Romney would be the eventual nominee because, in keeping with Republican Party tradition, *it appeared to be his turn*. None of their momentum was based on the strength of grassroots organization and retail politicking that traditionally characterizes the primary and caucus process. Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, the last of the Romney challengers to ride one of these ephemeral waves, at least established some credibility as a capable retail politician with extensive time spent on the ground in Pizza Ranches throughout Iowa.<sup>3</sup>

Developments in three areas of campaign activity over the past primary cycle seemed to drive the new dynamic of sequential momentum among the Republican candidates—the ubiquity of televised candidate debates, the rise of political benefactors through extraordinary super PAC donations, and the impact of social media on how campaigns reach voters, and in turn, on how voters consume political information. If Romney's ability to secure the Republican presidential nomination is evidence that these phenomena are not completely transforming the presidential primary cycle, then at a minimum, they are forcing campaigns to substantially alter how they engage the process.

## The Debates

Perhaps no aspect of the presidential selection cycle better characterized the ephemeral nature of frontrunner status this time around than the ubiquity of televised Republican

presidential debates. With upwards of two dozen debates held even before winter ice-out was declared in New Hampshire, candidates sought to ride the temporary wave of political celebrity on the cable news channels that went along with a captivating debate sound bite moment or breakout performance.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, these debates generate significant viewership for the networks and cable news channels that air them. While the economic rationale for broadcast is obvious, these events can also serve as a legitimate venue for civic education. Voters were given more opportunities than ever before to watch these candidates perform under pressure in a head-to-head format.

The danger is that this *debate saturation* transforms these opportunities for voter education into part of a weekly television and web-based horse race discussion about which candidate is up or down based on their most recent debate performance, rather than on the strength of their campaign building activities. Media outlets want these debates because they drive viewership, allowing them to schedule days of pre- and post-debate coverage for a one-hour event that increasingly breaks less and less substantive new ground for voters with each successive debate.<sup>5</sup> Individual host states love them, and New Hampshire is no exception, because they bring lots of attention and feed into the *kingmaker* aspect of the presidential selection process.

The concern for anyone accustomed to the retail politics experience is that these debates have become a proxy for actual momentum generated through grassroots campaigning. When candidates view a successful debate performance as the preferred means of generating the visibility usually associated with retail politics, and dedicate significant chunks of campaign time to debate preparation and participation in televised debate postmortems, they literally have less time, energy, and incentive to focus on putting the building blocks of a successful campaign in place. During this primary cycle, it was commonplace to see a candidate attain ephemeral frontrunner status through a single strong debate performance and subsequent opinion poll bump, only to have no campaign apparatus to fall back on, once their moment in the spotlight had passed. In the case of Texas Governor Rick Perry, it was his penchant for debate gaffes

<sup>2</sup> Frank Bruni, "Bush is Loosening His Image in Effort to Counter McCain," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1999 <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/29/us/bush-is-loosening-his-image-in-effort-to-counter-mccain.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>3</sup> Shushannah Walshe, "Rick Santorum Gives Final Pitch to Voters in Iowa," ABCNews.com, January 3, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blags/politics/2012/01/rick-santorum-gives-final-pitch-to-voters-in-iowa/>

<sup>4</sup> Beth Reinhard, "Are the Republicans Holding Too Many Debates?" *The Atlantic*.com, December 7, 2011 <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/12/are-the-republicans-holding-too-many-debates/249643/>

<sup>5</sup> Chris Cillizza and Rachel Weiner, "Presidential Debate Fatigue: How Many is Too Many?" *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2012 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blags/the-fix/post/presidential-debate-fatigue-how-many-is-too-many/2012/01/23/gIQAnSJGLQ\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blags/the-fix/post/presidential-debate-fatigue-how-many-is-too-many/2012/01/23/gIQAnSJGLQ_blog.html) See also, "45 % Say Too Many Debates, Mostly Useless," *Rasmussen Reports*, January 30, 2012 [http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/elections/election\\_2012/election\\_2012\\_presidential\\_election/january\\_2012/45\\_say\\_too\\_many\\_gop\\_debates\\_mostly\\_useless](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/elections/election_2012/election_2012_presidential_election/january_2012/45_say_too_many_gop_debates_mostly_useless)

that played a central role in his plummeting status as a potential Republican frontrunner, in spite of his vaunted reputation as a skilled retail politician.<sup>6</sup>

### Super PACs

The proliferation of debates was not the only phenomenon this cycle to offer the pretense of electoral viability to candidates who in the past would have fallen short of the threshold based on their actual campaign organizations. One of the biggest impacts of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010 has been the rise of the *super political action committee* or *super PAC*.<sup>7</sup> These ostensibly independent advocacy groups allow political donors to indirectly provide virtually unlimited amounts of cash to a preferred candidate, essentially giving those individuals with the requisite financial resources an opportunity to single-handedly underwrite a presidential campaign that would otherwise founder for lack of funds. In the most recent cycle, perhaps no example is more instructive than the decision of Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson to provide a super PAC associated with former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich with as much as \$21 million in financial support.<sup>8</sup>

There was a time not long ago in the politics of presidential selection, when the ability to establish a broad donor base, often through small-denomination contributions, was considered a central means of demonstrating the political viability of a campaign.<sup>9</sup> Now candidates can continue to have a highly visible presence in the race, even when they have no real organization to speak of, provided they capture the imagination of one or more wealthy political benefactors. Big money is, and will continue to be, a central part of presidential campaigns, and some political professionals now see the reality of a \$2 billion contest just around the corner.<sup>10</sup>

Putting aside the question of financial contributions and personal influence over politicians, a presidential campaign environment in which one or two wealthy donors can effectively

keep an otherwise nonviable presidential candidate in the mix is itself problematic. It only adds to the ephemeral nature of a process that previously tested candidates based on their ability to demonstrate their electability at least in part through the enlistment of thousands of financial donors to their cause.

### Social Media

It is not only debate-fueled media celebrity and financial benefactors that are changing the retail landscape for presidential candidates. The ubiquity of digital media and the rise of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are also transforming how candidates reach voters, and how those voters in turn access and consume political information. Candidates may be looking at a future where retail politicking and grassroots organizing are undertaken predominantly as a virtual experience, in which the new imperative for campaigns is to reach voters through their smart phones, digital tablets, and social networking web of personal relationships. More than any previous primary cycle, this one was dominated by the instantaneous provision and consumption of political content through a variety of digital media sources.<sup>11</sup> None of the Republican candidates in this cycle was without a significant presence on social media.

While the ubiquity and increasing affordability of digital media technology can potentially be a boon for cash-strapped ephemeral candidates, and those candidates with resources can assemble a digital war room of tech-savvy twenty-somethings, moving to a virtual retail politics experience creates several significant problems for campaigns. From the very first YouTube glimpse of Virginia Senator George Allen's *macaca* moment, it has been clear that the speed and reach of digital media make it essentially impossible for campaigns to control their message in the way they once could.<sup>12</sup> Politics now happens in real time for all to digest immediately, leaving little opportunity for campaigns to get out in front of potential problems. Candidate behavior that once would have been localized is now instantaneously national, and even international, grist for the political mill.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Burns, "Rick Perry on Debate Gaffe: 'I Stepped in It,'" Politico.com, November 9, 2011 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1111/68033.html>

<sup>7</sup> United States Supreme Court, *Citizens United V. Federal Election Commission* (No. 08-205) <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZS.html>

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Confessore, "New G.O.P. Help From Casino Mogul," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2012 [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/us/politics/sheldon-adelson-injects-more-cash-into-gop-groups.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/us/politics/sheldon-adelson-injects-more-cash-into-gop-groups.html?_r=1)

<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Cummings, "Small Donors Rewrite Fundraising Handbook," Politico.com, September 26, 2007 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0907/6014.html>

<sup>10</sup> Frank Bruni, "2012's Financial Free-for-All," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2012 [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/opinion/Sunday/bruni-2012s-financial-free-for-all.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/opinion/Sunday/bruni-2012s-financial-free-for-all.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y)

<sup>11</sup> "Social Media: The New Political Battleground," National Constitution Center, April 19, 2012 <http://constitutioncenter.org/calendar/social-media-the-new-political-battleground/> See also: Chandra Steele, "Election 2012: How Social Media Will Convert Followers into Voters," PCMag.com, January 20, 2012 <http://www.pcmag.com/slideshow/story/293078/election-2012-how-social-media-will-convert-followers-into-v> For a general take on the rise of social media, watch the YouTube video, "Social Media Revolution 2011," posted June 8, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SuNx0UrnEo> Thanks to Professor Robert Seidman of Southern New Hampshire University for bringing this video to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> "Allen's Listening Tour," YouTube, posted on August 14, 2006 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9G7gq7GQ71c>

This circumstance has also raised the bar for tactical warfare between campaigns, creating the new imperative that no tweet or social networking post goes unanswered. The danger here is that both candidates and voters may lose sight of the broader policy picture, due to constant exposure to a digital tit-for-tat in which the trivial is frequently elevated to the substantial by the campaigns. It is not yet clear whether this social media focus helps voters make more informed decisions than might have been the case through more traditional means of retail engagement with the candidates.

### Upsetting the Old Retail Order

Some political observers will argue that Mitt Romney's securing the Republican nomination means that the campaign with the largest organization and greatest financial resources triumphed once again, as would traditionally be the case. Romney came into the primary and caucus cycle as the frontrunner, and he left it as the Republican nominee. In between, a succession of ephemeral candidates gave Romney a run for his money, not because of their strong foundation of retail politics and grassroots organization, but because they were able to utilize debate visibility, super PAC donations, and ubiquitous digital media technology to create a successful virtual campaign for at least some stretch of time during the cycle.

All of this gave the primary cycle in New Hampshire a decidedly different feel from previous contests, as voters shifted to a new set of imperatives for making informed decisions about the candidates. The difference this time was that the political information they sought was not necessarily located where they previously expected to find it. It is true that Romney was able to adapt sufficiently to hold on to the nomination. But if these changes are longer-term, then we may increasingly see candidates playing by a different set of rules than those traditionally internalized by campaign professionals. Eventually one of these ephemeral candidates will win, thereby upsetting the old retail order for presidential selection. As a result, traditional notions of political viability may drop by the wayside, as a new type of politics is produced by the interaction of ephemeral candidate and virtual voter.

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