



# The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

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Contemporary observers of politics in America often reduce democracy to demography, and presidential elections are no exception. But do differences in class, gender, race, and religion really determine the vote?

*The Performance of Politics* develops a new way of looking at democratic struggles for big-time power and it explains what happened, and why, during the 2008 Presidential campaign in the United States. Through a series of simple but telling concepts about meaning and performance in public life, illustrated with vivid examples drawn from a range of media coverage, participant observation at a Camp Obama, and interviews with leading political journalists, Jeffrey Alexander argues that images, emotion, and performance are the central features of the battle for power. While these features have been largely overlooked by pundits, they are, in fact, the primary foci of political actors. Winning depends on creating images so that candidates can become heroes. Obama and McCain carefully constructed heroic self-images for their campaigns and the successful performance of those representations characterized not only each candidate's actual rallies, and not only their media messages but also the ground game. Money and organization facilitate the ground game, but they do not determine it. Emotion, images, and performance do. In other words, demography isn't destiny and political parties can't always deliver the vote. Though an untested Senator and the underdog in his own party, Obama, through his moving performances, succeeded in casting himself as the hero and McCain the anti-hero, as the only candidate fit to lead in challenging times.

Drawing on these themes, Alexander then reveals several periods of shifting public opinion and isolates the drama of Obama's celebrity, the effect of Sarah Palin on the race, and the emerging financial crisis through an engaging narrative that conveys the immediacy and excitement of the final months of the hist

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