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Review: Putting Cultural Sociology to the Test: Reflections on Jeffrey Alexander's "The Performance of Politics"

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*Book Reviews*

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**Putting Cultural Sociology to the Test: Reflections on  
Jeffrey Alexander's *The Performance of Politics***

Jeff Manza<sup>1</sup>

**The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power.** *Jeffrey Alexander*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

The never-ending campaign for the American presidency absorbs a remarkable amount of media attention, financial resources, and citizen activism. Every election cycle includes a "money primary" in which prospective candidates are vetted by insiders and large donors, a long primary campaign in one or both major parties in which a field of aspirants are whittled down to a single contender, followed by intense fall campaign in which the major candidates and their campaign staffs engage in a day-to-day (and sometimes hour-by-hour) struggle to shape public perceptions of the candidates and frame the issues to seek advantage.

There are many reasons why presidential campaigns sustain public and media attention. The campaigns are filled with intrigue (as the flaws, misstatements, and skeletons in the closet of high-profile candidates generate a steady stream of news reports and surprises), and the horse-race aspect produces compelling sporting metaphors and opportunities for "upsets" and "momentum swings" that sustain the drama. And the candidates become celebrities in their own right, with their personal flaws and missteps closely scrutinized. While actually capturing the White House may be unrealistic for most, the opportunity to sell books, obtain lucrative speaker fees, or get a cable news show are eminently attainable.

In spite of the enormous amount of attention and energy absorbed by presidential campaigns, social scientists have long tended to regard the campaigns themselves as noisy, but largely insignificant components of election outcomes. As early as the late 1940s, for example, Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson's influential studies of presidential campaigns produced a conclusion, surprising at the time, that relatively few citizens actually changed their minds over the

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course of the campaign. Instead, the Columbia scholars suggested, voters make up their minds based on the information received from friends, family members, workplace associates, or other influential people in their lives. Rooted in sociodemographic and organizational contexts, the vast majority of voters did not often seek clues about how to vote from the campaigns themselves. The influential "Michigan School" of Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, and their colleagues provided a different but equally dismissive analysis of the impact of the campaign in their landmark work *The American Voter* (1960). In that tradition, votes were seen as coming from citizens aligned through enduring partisan identification that typically flowed from their parents and reinforced through a variety of social-psychological processes that were mostly unconnected (or merely reinforced) by the campaign itself.

The coming of rational choice models of elections, beginning with Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* in 1957, pushed the role of voters' material interests (and perceptions of the economy and party policy positions) to the forefront of election research but did not dislodge the basic view of the limited impact of the campaign itself. The increasingly sophisticated and successful election forecasting models that grew out of the rational choice tradition struck a further blow against taking campaigns seriously. The forecasting models produced a large body of evidence that macroeconomic conditions in the run-up to an election, combined with citizens' perceptions of the incumbent party and subjective assessments of the recent past and immediate future of the macro-economy, have formidable predictive power. While the forecasting models vary in the ways in which they measure and weight these factors and how many and what types of noneconomic factors they consider, no one can seriously doubt that voters' perceptions of the economy (and who is to blame for its good or bad health) are vital sources of influence on *aggregate* vote outcomes. Indeed, relative to the weak predictive powers of most social science models, these have proved quite powerful and successful.

The classical models of elections have, of course, evolved in many ways over the past 30 years. Some analysts have paid increasing attention to media frames in the campaign context, developing more nuanced ways of understanding campaign communications and their impact at the margins. But it is fair to say that to this day almost all election research presents either election outcomes or the patterning of the votes as their primary explananda, not the campaign itself. The upshot has been that studies of presidential campaigns themselves have been largely marginalized, increasingly becoming the province of journalists and communication scholars who find meaningful puzzles in the rhythms of the campaign itself. Contemporary models in political sociology do little to destabilize this conclusion. Focusing on the role of corporate money and interest group alignments, political sociologists also often treat elections as epiphenomenal, with the real action happening behind the scenes both before and after elections occur.

Into the face of this long-standing and multi-faceted consensus, Jeffrey Alexander's *The Performance of Politics* (hereafter *POP*) seeks to revive social science interest in presidential campaigns. *POP* is a large book, surrounded by a

small book. The larger book (primarily spelled out in a long and elegant theoretical appendix that provides a crisp overview of Alexander's long-standing research program in cultural sociology) is an attempt to make good on the author's claims for the autonomy of the "civil sphere." The larger argument is that cultural practices are not simple products of social forces, but rather independent factors in their own right. When actors enter the civil sphere, they have agency and potential for impactful action. They follow scripts but also reinterpret and rework them in novel ways. We need, Alexander emphasizes, a true "cultural sociology," not a "sociology of culture" (where the outcomes of culture are all determined elsewhere). Electoral campaigns, in this sense, are ideal empirical contexts to study. Alexander's efforts to restore the campaign itself to a place of honor is to insist on both the autonomy and importance of cultural forces against such "deterministic" models of much of contemporary cultural sociology. This is fresh challenge, one very much worth debating.

The smaller (but lengthy) book that aims to validate the thesis is a detailed examination of the 2008 presidential campaign and Barack Obama's triumph. The candidates—Obama and John McCain, but also Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin—are placed by Alexander on a cultural stage in which their "performances" shape the ultimate outcome of the election. They must navigate a set of well-established cultural "binaries" and "boundaries" in their attempt to represent the broad civil society. The somewhat thin empirical foundations of the study include some time in the field with Obama's ground troops and close reading of national news reporting (the major broadcast and cable networks and the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*). The study of the campaign highlights three key turning points where the ultimate outcome rests: the McCain campaign's "celebrity" framing of Obama, the selection of Palin as McCain's running mate, and the two campaigns and candidates responses to the financial meltdown in September 2008.

What makes *POP* an exciting undertaking is that it puts Alexander's cultural sociology into a sharp empirical context, one where we have lots of good data and existing theory with which to evaluate it. As a venture in providing a rich descriptive framework for understanding the various moves made by the candidates, Alexander's analysis is, I think, quite compelling. His discussion of Obama's race speech in the aftermath of the blow-up over Rev. Jeremiah Wright is particularly apt in deconstructing how and why the speech and Obama's post-Wright positioning was so effective at defusing the race question. As a retrospective narrative of the campaign, it compares favorably to the standard journalistic accounts (albeit without some of the juicier insider revelations found in books such as John Heilman and Mark Halperin's *Game Change*). It sensibly focuses not just on the campaign frames but also how the media presented and reinterpreted those frames. Obama's victory results from his successful engagement with the civil sphere, but his achievement was neither simple nor clear-cut.

The small book succeeds in many ways as a readable account of the campaign, yet it also raises questions for the larger theoretical agenda that, I think, Alexander only partially resolves. Because of the interpretative spin of the

project, *POP* generally avoids making explicit (and testable) causal arguments. Yet such claims run throughout the book. For example, how do we “know” that the three campaign moments Alexander features really mattered, as opposed to mere blips along the way? The answers provided come down to evidence that during these moments the polling needle moved in seemingly meaningful ways. But Alexander largely stops there. The implicit counterfactual is that moments like the celebrity campaign or the Palin appointment, for example, *could* have produced a different outcome but for the way the candidates handled them (and the tensions they created). We have no good way of testing that proposition with the tools provided here.

Are these counterfactuals even remotely plausible? Alexander’s extended analysis of Palin’s role in the campaign provides a good way to think through the issues. He devotes a full chapter to Palin’s arrival in the campaign, but never establishes that it is anything more than a temporary, if noisy, development. The latter possibility is, however, almost certainly correct. Decades of research on vice-presidential selection and candidates have established that running mates have little significant impact on the final tally; good or bad, their impact is largely non-existent. To be sure, Palin’s explosive entry into the campaign was associated with a short-term movement toward McCain. Palin was virtually unknown upon her introduction, and her stirring speech at the Republican convention—with its memorable, searing attacks on the mainstream media, “community organizers,” and invocation of a putatively authentic self-reliant America in no need of big government—had genuine bite (at least until the fictions it contained could be unmasked). But the entire exercise of working through her rise and fall only makes sense if we believe in the plausibility of the implicit counterfactual. And Alexander gives us no reason to think that it did. The leading alternative hypothesis—that the tracking polls suggesting a McCain surge may themselves have simply been picking up noise from a temporary increase in the likelihood of conservative Republicans taking pollsters’ calls—is never considered.

Looking back, the real story of the 2008 campaign is probably not that different than the mainstream forecasting models would have it. After the binaries are worked and the boundaries are straddled, the candidates more or less ended up where the forecasting models predicted: a moderate but solid victory for the Democratic candidate. The campaign, as is so often the case, proved far less influential than the mountains of daily media coverage might suggest. This is not to say that there are never cases where campaigns—and the micro moves of candidates and their strategists—have ultimately impacted the outcome. Al Gore famously underperformed in the 2000 election, narrowly winning the popular vote (but losing in the contested electoral college outcome) in an election that should have more comfortably gone the Democrats’ way (at the time of a stunningly good macroeconomy and the still popular, albeit controversial, Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton as the outgoing president). But most of the time, the best of the forecasting models get very close to predicting the final result well in advance of election day.

So what does this mean for a cultural analysis of presidential elections? Does cultural sociology provide analytical tools that can take us beyond the forecasting models as well as theories of elections that are common in contemporary political sociology? We do know something about the limits of the forecasting models. They fall short in explaining both individual-level voting behavior *and* in accounting for why some candidates gain traction while others do not. Alexander's cultural-sociological account (in which candidates' performance role in their roles shapes the outcomes) has something important to add to this model, especially when it comes to topics like primary campaigns for the presidency (where the field is winnowed and a major party nominee is eventually chosen). We simply cannot explain why *most* well-funded and placed candidates fail or why *sometimes* a candidate without such backing becomes relevant without paying some attention to how well the candidates perform their campaign roles and, in particular, where and when they come up short (as most inevitably do). Obama's rise owes much to his phenomenal fundraising ability (and success in convincing wealthy donors that he is the kind of candidate they could trust) but *also* his ability to successfully present himself as embodying public demand for regime change at the tail end of the Bush years. Alexander's model is as rich as any alternative in this latter regard.

But it seems to me that the real power of a cultural sociology of elections lies in unpacking how and why the binaries and boundaries of American politics remain so enduring and powerful in the first place. To take such a step requires a turn to analyzing public opinion, not just polls about the horse race but also the issues and policy stances of the candidates and parties in relation to the larger public mood. This suggests two projects for a cultural sociology of elections that build from Alexander's position. We need to understand both how and why the policy positions of the mass public are mostly stable over time but also capable of shifting in small and meaningful ways that can influence election outcomes. Every election takes place in a (mass) opinion environment of overall stability but also one in which some "wedge" issues matter. In this way, public opinion provides a key mechanism through which "culture" shapes elections. Reducible to neither social structural determinants nor easy manipulation by political elites, mass opinion is a key missing link to restoring (and making analytical and testable proposition) about the powerful impact of culture on elections.

## POSTSCRIPT DECEMBER 2012

This review essay was written in 2011, before the 2012 presidential election launched in earnest. How did the events of latter campaign reflect on Alexander's approach? How would Alexander's interpretation compare with the emerging analyses of Obama's reelection that have been provided? I would insist we await the arrival of high-quality survey data and further analysis and reflection before drawing any firm conclusions. But it does appear that Obama's victory in 2012, in the face of a long economic downturn and a strong Republican triumph

in the 2010 midterm election, does indeed seem to involve more of a cultural dynamic than is warranted for the 2008 campaign. Obama's victory over Republican Mitt Romney was unquestionably impacted by the inability of the challenger to convince a majority of American voters that he was capable of serving as a "man of the people," that he could understand the plight of struggling American families and was prepared to offer policies that would help. Romney was surely the wrong candidate for 2012. Other than the first presidential debate, when an aggressive Romney roasted a shockingly unprepared Obama and momentarily reached parity in the polls, the campaign's key moments and turning points all reflected Romney's weaknesses. In the summer of 2012, while Romney was short of funds from a bruising primary battle, the Obama campaign ran an aggressive series of ads portraying Romney as ruthless destroyer of jobs and companies in search of financial profits. Romney's secretly taped assertion to an audience of affluent campaign donors that he could not hope to gain the votes of the "47% of the people. . . [who] are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them" powerfully reinforced the Obama message. Hurricane Sandy provided the opportunity on the eve of the election for the incumbent president to play the role of a crisis management president, perhaps among the easiest of the roles to perform and excel. In short, while a Democratic presidential candidate was almost certain to prevail in 2008, irrespective of the cultural dynamics, the 2012 campaign highlights more clearly some of the ways in which a cultural sociology model can provide insights that help us understand an outcome that was far less certain and surprising in many respects.

## The Problem With Ideas

James M. Jasper<sup>1</sup>

**The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Mobilization Works.** *Ziad W. Munson*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Scholars have many failings, and idealism may not be the worst of them. But it is pervasive. We tend to formulate abstract, neatly packaged bundles of propositions about the world, and to credit them with enormous causal importance. Despite regular attacks from pragmatism, phenomenology, behaviorism, and other traditions, we inevitably return to some form of idealism. Ideas are good to think with. In the study of social movements, we have taken ideas, frames, identities, ideologies, and far more to be central causal variables. Lately,

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