

# CAMPAIGN COMMENTARY

## Q & A *with John Lapinski*

by Larry Teitelbaum

The presidential candidates criss-cross each state on the primary calendar, make their case to voters and repair to their suites on election night to await the verdict. What they hope to see is a big checkmark beside their name on the television screen. As a senior analyst in the Election Unit at NBC News, John Lapinski is among those who hold the gavel. The associate professor of political science scrubs the exit polls, and once there is convincing evidence, the “decision desk,” at which he holds a seat, declares a winner. He sits behind the scenes at NBC News in New York City, feeding information to Brian Williams and Tom Brokaw among others. Lapinski studies lawmaking in Congress as well as congressional and presidential campaigns and elections. He has been with NBC since 2000, the year he earned his Ph.D. from Columbia. This primary season, he’s worked every election night during the frenetic sprint to the White House. In the spring, he paused from his constant shuttle between campus and New York to talk about the Democratic contest and the general election.

### **How reliable are polls?**

So many of the polls have not been good in this presidential primary season. Polls are becoming harder and harder to do, primarily because of changing habits and changing technology. It used to be that you’d get very high response rates because people had landline telephones and people answering them were willing to take surveys. Now everyone has cell phones, particularly young Americans. That, and the rise of answering machines, makes it much harder to reach people. If people decide either you can’t contact them or they won’t take the survey, it’s hard to get an accurate reading. Compounding this problem in 2008 is the fact that the polls have gauged the opinions of “likely voters,” and there have been so many new voters this election cycle, including many more African Americans and younger folks. Both of these groups are somewhat more difficult to reach than other groups via telephone surveys, thereby making surveys somewhat less reliable.

### **How about exit polls? Early ones incorrectly indicated that John Kerry would win the 2004 presidential election.**

People who vote early in the morning oftentimes don’t look like the people who vote later in the day. This is why it is official policy that the networks do not release partial exit poll data (though it has on occasion been leaked). You have to remember, elections are determined by everybody who is voting. At NBC, we’re very conservative in making projections on winners based on exit polls.

### **What is motivating voters?**

Different subsets of voters have different motivations. Some people who never thought of themselves as being political, or that the political system was important, are just finding their voices. They’re realizing that some very consequential decisions have been made — especially regarding the

war. The economy has been a constant concern of primary voters and became more important in later-date primaries as economic conditions grew worse. Some people are issues voters — gay marriage, right to life and those sorts of things are big. Then there are pocketbook voters. It will matter a lot to them not only what the president will do for the country as a whole but what he'll do for them individually.

## **What do you think will be the aftermath of the Democratic primary in the general election?**

Senator Hillary Clinton's actions now, I think, will diminish divisions among Democrats. Particularly important are her remarks that distance her from the vice presidential spot, and her recent gestures toward asking her large donors to turn their support to Senator Obama. Nonetheless, Republicans hope to siphon off women voters. Given how the 2008 primary was so demographically driven, this is a reasonable hope but one that I think, for numerous reasons, will fall short.

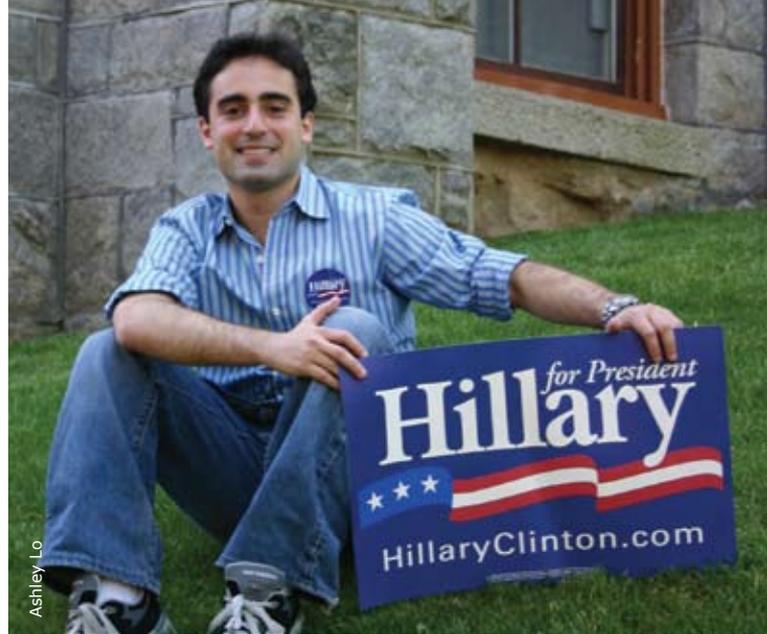
## **What are some of the key issues that will define the election in the months to come?**

I think that there are about a dozen or so states that will decide this contest. So, it's critical to think about what issues are key in states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida and Ohio. I think the economy will be more important in these states, and my gut — based on some of my academic research — is that the race issue is also key. It will be important in a number of ways, including differential turnout among African Americans in the general election as well as possible negative predispositions among some demographic groups toward African Americans. Our exit poll data for the 2008 presidential primary season showed that a non-trivial number of voters revealed that race would be a critical factor in determining their vote choice. This was true of African Americans as well as whites. Consequently, I think Senator Obama's ability to appeal to white voters, particularly those in the middle-class, will determine whether he is able to win enough swing states to carry the election. How will he do this? This, in my mind, is the big question of the campaign.

## **Which party will win the White House?**

This is going to be a very tight election. A lot of people thought the Democrats were just going to slip into office. It's going to be a hard-fought, tough battle. They're going to be fighting state by state. McCain could appeal to independent voters in battleground states.

*Larry Teitelbaum is editor of the Penn Law Journal.*



Ashley Lo

## **HELFENBEIN FOR HILLARY**

It has become an article of faith: Senator Barack Obama rocks the youth vote. He's the Pied Piper candidate, a walking, talking advertisement for change and idealism who shepherds his flock on college campuses across America. So how come David Helfenbein, C'08, didn't get the text message?

Helfenbein supported Senator Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential race. A double major in political science and communication and public service, Helfenbein is hooked on Hillary, has been since he was 13 years old.

"My generation was born under the Clinton presidency," says Helfenbein, explaining his identification with the Clintons. "We grew up with Clinton just as, to a certain degree, the Baby Boom generation grew up with Kennedy."

Helfenbein met Hillary Clinton in March 2000, when the senator visited the Robert E. Bell Middle School in Chappaqua, NY, where he and the Clintons are neighbors. The former first lady was there to speak at a naturalization ceremony, and the school asked Helfenbein to say a few words in a foreign language. Instead, he went off script, praising Mrs. Clinton, who was running for the U.S. Senate. Later, he crashed a private reception so he could talk to her.

"I went up to her and said, 'I would like to work on your campaign,' and she was incredibly nice and incredibly receptive, and I gave her my contact information," recalls Helfenbein.

That night, a member of Clinton's staff called to accept his offer. Since then, he's worked on her Senate campaigns, during which he created a group called "Kids for Hillary," and interned in her Senate offices. As a foot soldier in her presidential run, last summer he decamped to Clinton's Iowa headquarters and he's done advance work in Tennessee, New York and Pennsylvania.

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