

Discussion Notes on Tables 1 & 2: Analysis of Candidates' Emails to Supporters

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Candidates running for any office struggle to define themselves to the voters, while voters often struggle to learn exactly who these candidates are. Most of the information that the public receives about candidates is filtered – either through the news media or through our own preconceptions about what the candidates stand for and what they are like as individuals. Therefore, if we really want to gauge the beliefs of the candidates in any election and the differences between them, it is useful to see what they choose to focus on and the ways they choose to present themselves to the public. In recent presidential elections, e-mail has become a major tool used by the candidates to get their messages out to voters. It is cheap, nearly instantaneous, and unfiltered by the media, and can thus provide a valuable insight into the central messages that the campaigns are trying to communicate, messages dictated by some combination of the candidate's own beliefs about what is most important and by their desire to craft a winning strategy that will appeal to a majority of voters. This election is no exception. Using a record of all of the e-mails sent by the John McCain and Barack Obama campaigns to their supporters between June 1, 2007 and the end of the primary season, we can get a better insight into what each candidate believes the next president must do, the qualities that that president will need, and the strategies that will be required to get there.

The first thing to notice is the sheer number of e-mails each candidate sent out to supporters during this timeframe. In just over a year, each sent out more than 160 e-mails to those who signed up on their lists, or an average of more than three per week. That is more times than many people talk to their family members in an average week. Clearly, both candidates felt a great need to stay in close contact with their supporters. More importantly, though, comparing the issues each candidate focused on, as well as the way each candidate was portrayed in his own communications, illustrates important differences of both substance and strategy between the two remaining major party competitors for president – differences which should certainly be useful in helping voters figure out which individual they will favor in November.

Table 1 examines the frequency with which each candidate mentioned the most commonly discussed issues in the campaign, issues that represented a broad spectrum of policy debates. Some, like abortion, health care reform, and the war in Iraq are controversial issues on which the parties have deep, longstanding divisions. Others, such as education, terrorism, or the welfare of children, are those on which both parties and all of the candidates are in basic agreement about the goals, even if they disagree about the best ways to reach them. Additionally, in this election cycle, the idea of change became an

important issue in and of itself – one that candidates in both parties spoke about extensively. While there were some similarities in the issues that each candidate focused on, what is most striking in looking at their messages is how much McCain and Obama spoke past one another as each addressed his own party in the first stage of the election process. The most common issues mentioned in e-mails from the McCain campaign were Iraq, terrorism, national security, the economy, and government spending. E-mails from the Obama campaign, on the other hand, focused most on change, the influence of special interests or money in politics, Iraq, health care, and foreign policy. Clearly, the McCain campaign was focused first and foremost on issues related to security, with a secondary emphasis on economic issues, while the Obama campaign was focused primarily on emphasizing a reform agenda, followed by other issues that were clearly important to Democratic voters this year. Note, by the way, how some of these issues were dramatically more common in one candidate's campaign than the other. Obama was about six times more likely to mention change than McCain, while McCain was about four times more likely to mention terrorism than was Obama. Similarly large disparities could be found in the frequency with which each campaign talked about the influence of special interests, government spending, and national security. Even where the candidates overlapped – on Iraq – putting that issue in the context of the other most commonly discussed issues by the campaign gives it an extremely distinctive emphasis for each campaign. Talking about Iraq in the context of terrorism and national security suggests a very different view of the war than talking about Iraq in terms of change and a more general discussion of foreign policy, views which help to explain the significantly different policy recommendations of the candidates on this issue.

A fuller understanding of the positioning of each candidate, however, also requires examining the way that the candidates themselves were described in their own e-mails (see Table 2). Obama was most frequently described as being honest, a leader, inspirational, unifying, and as displaying good judgment. McCain was most frequently described as a leader, experienced, courageous, as someone who has served others, and as bold. Overall, though, McCain e-mails were more than twice as likely to mention any quality of the candidate than were Obama e-mails, and about three times as likely to discuss some specific experience in the candidate's background that was relevant to his case for being elected. The differences were so great, in fact, that while the word "leader" was used to describe Obama more than any other word but "honest," McCain was still nine times more likely to be described as a leader than Obama. These differences, however, are not surprising and, in fact, are very much in keeping with the differences in issue emphasis. McCain, emphasizing a national security focused agenda, also emphasized qualities that reinforce that agenda. Clearly, if voters are most concerned about security issues, a candidate who is a leader, experienced, brave, and bold will be appealing. Obama, on the other hand, emphasized a reform agenda, and the qualities that are mentioned most

frequently in his e-mails go well with that agenda. If voters are most concerned about government reform, then they are likely to be interested in selecting someone who is honest, inspirational, unifying, and displays good judgment.

These differences in emphasis are not simply strategic. Presidential candidates have a number of options about the issues they will discuss and the ways that they will present themselves to the public. While strategic considerations certainly narrow down those choices, ultimately, candidates will choose a message that they believe will not just help them to win, but also reflects their most basic beliefs about what a president should be. The differences in the messages of the Obama and McCain campaigns, therefore, reflect real differences in their agendas and in their beliefs, differences which are useful for voters to understand. A Barack Obama presidency would be quite distinct from a John McCain presidency. Which one the voters will prefer in November, and which one has laid out a better plan for dealing with the challenges of the next four years, remains to be seen.