

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

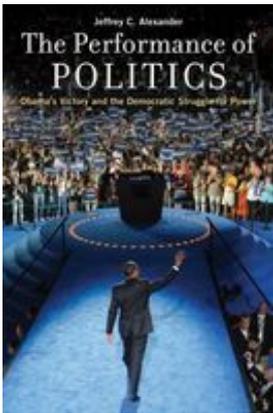
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/20/book-review-the-performance-of-politics-obama%e2%80%99s-victory-and-the-struggle-for-democratic-power/?pfstyle=w>

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Matthew Partridge hops across the pond to see what lessons can be drawn from the tricks of theatrical American politics, discussed in **Jeffrey C. Alexander's** recent book.

The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Struggle for Democratic Power. By Jeffrey C. Alexander. [Oxford University Press](#). January 2011.

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"It's the economy, stupid": the [unofficial slogan](#) of Bill Clinton's successful 1992 election campaign now seems to have been taken to heart by many political scientists the world over. Indeed, the belief that the outcome of elections are determined largely, or even wholly, by the state of the economy has almost become an article of faith, with those who still believe in the importance of campaigns, candidates and policies viewed as quaint. However, although economic conditions are an important in deciding who wins elections, there are enough counter-examples, such as Ronald Reagan's landslide re-election in 1984 and Al Gore's defeat in 2000, to suggest that there are other factors at work.

Demography, another factor that political scientists like to examine, is also of limited value. Although there always are distinct racial, sexual and ethnic voting patterns to every American election, these are constantly in flux. After all, Barack Obama beat Hillary Clinton in racially homogenous Iowa but lost to her in California where nearly half of voters are either non-white or Latino. Whilst a relative increase in African-American turnout boosted Obama's winning margin in the general election, exit polls suggested that he improved on John Kerry's margins across all racial groups, experiencing the biggest increase with Latino voters.

Given the problems of these reductionist explanations it is refreshing to read [Professor Jeffrey Alexander's](#) book. Alexander argues that *"[since] candidates cannot reliably count on the objective interests of citizens or their official party affiliations to guarantee votes, they must struggle to gain them"*. He also suggests that *"the voters who referee the struggle for power have available symbolic representations of candidates, which the mass media supply"*, making elections *"theatrical"*. The book therefore focuses on the role of emotion, images and performance in the 2008 American Presidential election.

The first section, 'Power Performance and Representation', looks at Alexander's broad arguments about the importance of image. 'Heroes, Binaries and Boundaries', the second part, looks at how positive (and negative) images, of candidates be created. Finally, 'Victory and Defeat' covers the three events that Alexander believes were vital in determining the electorate's impression of both McCain and Obama: the attempt to paint Obama as a vacuous celebrity, the selection of Sarah Palin, and the candidates' reaction to the financial crisis.

Although the theories and terms that underpin *The Performance of Politics* come from sociology rather than politics, Alexander is able to justify their use in election analysis, and avoids the trap of making his work inaccessible to those outside his discipline. He then uses a wide variety of sources to back up his arguments, even constructing his own set of aggregate polling figures. He also manages to avoid many of the clichés that dominate other accounts of Obama's victory, for instance downplaying the importance of [Obama's internet presence](#).

There are some areas of weakness. There is little counterfactual speculation, with only a brief mention that Palin was not McCain's original choice as running-mate, while the fact that the Arizona Senator initially opposed bailing out the financial sector is almost completely overlooked. The decision to largely ignore the Republican primaries means that Alexander misses an opportunity to show how narratives of heroism can backfire, with Rudolph Giuliani's repeated references to his strong leadership after the terrorist attacks transforming him into "[*a noun, verb and 9/11*](#)".

However, these are relatively minor objections. What is striking about Alexander's work is his eagerness to be objective. For instance, he uses the controversial polling company [Rasmussen](#) and the Republican-leaning website [Real Clear Politics](#) as major sources for the polling charts that he compiles. He also frequently uses quotes from the conservative [Wall Street Journal](#). Of course, he could have been more critical of Obama's actions (and less cynical about McCain), and it could be argued that he tries too hard to be neutral when discussing the American media's timid attempts to scrutinise Palin's record. However, given that he clearly supported Obama enthusiastically, Alexander succeeds in making *The Performance of Politics* relatively even-handed.

Ultimately, Alexander ably answers the rhetorical question, "*why another book about Obama and McCain?*", that opens the work. While this might not be a "campaign classic" along of the lines of the Pulitzer-winning [The Making of the President, 1960](#) by Theodore White, or Richard Ben Cranmer's epic [What It Takes: The Way to the White House](#), it is a substantive contribution to the academic canon on American politics.

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