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Election Fever

By [Michael Tomasky](#)

Following publication of Michael Tomasky's review of Al Gore's book *The Assault on Reason* (Penguin, 2007) in the September 27 issue, many readers sent questions about the current political situation to the *New York Review* Web site, www.nybooks.com, and to the *Review* itself. We publish here a selection from these letters, along with Michael Tomasky's comments. The following text is one of a series of regular *New York Review* Web features in which contributors respond to readers' questions. Other features can be found at www.nybooks.com/qa. —The Editors

Q: *Several readers have asked how Al Gore's efforts to raise awareness about climate change will affect the 2008 campaign. Is global warming likely to be an important issue for the leading Democrats in the primaries? Now that Republicans too are talking about climate change, is there a sense that the Democratic position needs to be more forcefully articulated?*

Michael Tomasky: Well, the need for Democratic positions to be more forcefully articulated is a given across the board.

Despite the attention surrounding Gore's winning the Nobel this month, I doubt, alas, that climate change will be a leading issue either in the Democratic primaries or in the general election. It's not a "signature" issue of any of the leading Democratic candidates, and the Republicans either believe it doesn't exist as a problem or at the very least have to pretend that they believe that or risk offending their hard-core base. Not toeing the right-wing line on this carries a price: one evangelical conservative leader, Richard Cizik, has tried to press the evangelical movement to put global warming on its agenda but has met stiff opposition within his own organization, the National Association of Evangelicals. Finally, since climate change is unfolding over decades, it seems unlikely that it's the kind of issue that can be pushed to the forefront by one signal event.

However, the fact that it is unlikely to be a leading issue is not to say that climate change will or should play no role in the general election. I think it would be very smart politics on the part of the Democratic nominee to force the Republican nominee to state for the record—in a debate, say—whether climate change is or is not a problem (and specifically a problem to which humans have contributed). If the Republican plays to his base and denies this, he'll look crazy to centrist voters; if he plays to the middle and affirms it, he'll anger the base. So it strikes me that it is an issue of political utility, if played right.

Substantively, assuming a Democratic president, my guess is that actually doing something about climate change is likely to be a second-term issue. Why? Because acting to slow it will require doing something pretty big, which will require spending an enormous amount of political capital, and that's something I suspect a president will be unlikely to want to risk, especially given (and it is a given) that health care reform will come first. Also, action on climate change really requires the cooperation of Congress. This means two things: (1) the Democrats will need to improve their majorities (especially in the Senate) to do anything meaningful on climate change; (2) Representative John Dingell (D-Michigan) will need to retire, because he will take the auto industry position straight down the line, and he's extremely powerful. Nancy Pelosi has tried to end-run Dingell on environmental issues, but so far with limited success.

Q: *Readers have also wondered what the real possibilities are at this point that a third candidate, such as John Edwards—or even Gore himself—could upset the commanding lead established by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Will the new primary schedule make it more or less likely that the front-runners could be upset in the early primaries?*

MT: Regarding Edwards, he's by no means out of it. If he wins Iowa in January, which is a live possibility, he's suddenly a front-rank contender. Gore, as I wrote in my piece, is highly unlikely to run.

The new primary schedule, or more to the point the media's treatment of the new schedule, is one of the most maddening things to me about this political season so far. Originally, the (laudable) aim of adding South Carolina and Nevada as early primaries, and of other larger states jumping forward to February 5, was to diminish the influence of Iowa and New Hampshire. But the media—the experts on cable TV and so on—have decided that the new calendar only augments the importance of Iowa and New Hampshire. I haven't been able to figure out from any of them exactly why this is so, except that for whatever reason they've decided it's so. It's a classic case of the media pretending to be describing a reality but actually creating it by constantly yakking about it.

Thus, the experts have already agreed: if Edwards loses Iowa, he's finished. This seems preposterous to me. What if the Iowa result is a very close three-way result among Clinton, Obama, and Edwards, and Edwards finishes third by just a few percentage points? The media will be shooing him out of the race from the moment the polls close.

So I'm afraid the new calendar makes the possibility of upsets far less likely, because the media seem to have decided that they want the matter settled as early as possible. Don't ask me. They're the experts.

Let us hope that something goes so monumentally wrong that by 2012, real reform of this process might occur. There are several worthwhile proposals out there, which involve in essence holding regional primaries on a rotating basis. But Iowans and New Hampshireites think God chiseled their right to hold the first caucus and the first primary on tablets of stone, and leaders of both parties appear to be too cowardly to challenge them.

Q: Given that a 2008 Democratic presidential victory will require that the Republican base stays home, I'm surprised by your characterization of the Democratic nomination as largely a race between the country's most disliked woman and a black man whose name rhymes with the world's most wanted terrorist. Their respective nominations would be the political equivalent of poking the Republican base in the eye with a stick. Exactly which of the red states that Kerry lost in 2004 do you see either Clinton or Obama winning in 2008?

—Jon Schwedler

MT: Well, this is a difficult matter, certainly. Whenever I hear Democrats getting overconfident about taking the White House in 2008, I remind them of what you've just said. Their visages tend to grow more somber.

It is a fact, though, that in current national general-election polls, Clinton and Obama (and Edwards too) beat the major Republican candidates. Obviously, what people tell pollsters in mid-2007 may be quite different from how they actually vote in late 2008, after a rough campaign. And a Republican campaign against a woman (especially that woman) or a black man could be far worse than rough. There's no question that conservatives will turn out in droves to stop Clinton, and possibly Obama. And then there's the more nuanced question of white males who aren't movement conservatives, and who might have female or African-American bosses. They may be willing to vote for a woman or a black man for senator or governor but they may also, on some psychological level, be reluctant to vote for a woman or a black man for president. This is the category that worries me.

On the other hand I think that women and black voters respectively will turn out in huge numbers to back them. The fact is, Clinton and Obama are the Democrats' best candidates; Democratic voters have been affirming that to pollsters for several months running. So they clearly have things going for them. Undoubtedly certain conservative operatives will put out subtle (or perhaps not subtle) sexist or racist appeals, and they'll work with some voters, but a smart campaign can foment a backlash against that sort of thing too.

The question of individual states seems to me to depend in part on who the nominee selects as his/her choice for vice-president. I think Jim Webb of Virginia would be a terrific choice for either Clinton or Obama—a Scots-Irish white man from the South with a military credential (who could also be a very good vice-president). Webb would make winning Virginia, an increasingly purple state, a possibility for Democrats, and, used the right way, he could help in West Virginia and Ohio. Ted Strickland, the popular first-term Democratic governor of Ohio, might be a strong choice as well.

Not contingent on Webb or anyone else are potential Democratic advances in Iowa (which Gore won but John Kerry lost), Colorado, and New Mexico. Colorado shifted dramatically in the Democratic direction in 2006, and New Mexico shows signs of moving that way. Those three states might go Democratic because of longer-term demographic changes (this is happening in Virginia as well). They add up to twenty-one electoral votes (Virginia has thirteen).

But on the other side of the argument, there are a number of states won by both Gore and Kerry that it seems to me Clinton or Obama could lose, because Gore and Kerry both won them by fairly thin margins. They are Minnesota (ten electoral votes), Wisconsin (ten), New Hampshire (four), and most importantly Pennsylvania (twenty-one). So yes, it is entirely possible that if the Republican base is highly motivated out of fear of a particular Democrat becoming president, the election could be a wipeout, which would affect not only the presidency but Senate and House races as well. It's a highly volatile situation.

The Web site www.270towin.com is a fun site that enables the user to click on states, change outcomes, and see how the electoral college vote would stack up.

Q: In every presidential election the Republicans do the same number on the opposing candidate. They attack, slander, challenge their patriotism and their masculinity, call them "weak" on national security, a distinctly Darwinian element of right-wing, reactionary thought. The Democratic candidates do little to respond and end up, in truth, looking weak. And they lose. The only exception here is Bill Clinton, who always responded and fought back and won two elections. Why don't Democrats run a candidate who won't take it? The slew of Republican candidates for president are ripe for a licking and it seems to me Gore is still incapable of letting them have it.

—Alex Ricciuti

MT: It would appear that the Democrats' toughest candidate in this regard is the one who learned it from her husband. Hillary Clinton likes to remind audiences that she's taken the other side's abuse for fifteen years and is still standing, so she's the one Democrats want to send into the fight. And she's not wrong. I watched up close in 2000, the year of her first Senate campaign, as her opponent, Rick Lazio, the New York State Republican Party, and several national conservative organizations threw all they had at her. Her campaign responded to every attack, and quickly.

Just one example. The Lazio campaign put up a commercial the Saturday before the election, aimed at Jewish voters, showing an Arab-American man who had donated to Clinton's campaign saying in a public-speaking engagement that he was a "supporter of Hezbollah." The Clinton campaign immediately called Ed Koch, who had credibility with the kind of Jewish voters who might be swayed by the Lazio ad, and had him tape a commercial yelling at Lazio to "stop with the sleaze, already!" It was instantaneous and effective. Many of the same staffers who were in that "war room" are with her today—Mandy Grunwald, who is in charge of the ads, and Howard Wolfson, who directs communication strategy. They won't let the kind of attacks you describe go unanswered.

The other campaigns we know less about. They haven't been through a baptism like that. The larger question is about the Democratic Party as a whole. First, whether the campaign of the nominee and the Democratic National Committee and various state and local Democrats around the country can coordinate a response to attacks; second, whether the Democrats have yet grasped the importance of emotional appeals in political combat, a skill many Republicans have mastered. In an earlier issue of *The New York Review*, I

wrote about *The Political Brain*, by Drew Westen, a psychologist at Emory University, who describes how Democrats have spent the last couple of elections appealing to people's heads (reason) while Republicans have appealed to emotion. Since (and I'd like to think partly because of) my review, Westen has become a celebrated figure in Democratic circles, and party leaders like Bill Clinton and Howard Dean have praised his insights. Democrats need to have taken them to heart by this time next year. [□](#)

That will mean not only countering attacks but making some: framing the debate so that the other side is on the defensive for a change. The Democratic nominee, the party, and the various "527" organizations that will air commercials and call voters would seem to have fertile ground to plow here: Iraq, the failure to capture Osama bin Laden, the S-CHIP veto, the Republicans' unwillingness to deal with health care, and on and on. So more than fighting back and playing effective defense, we should really be looking for the Democrats in 2008 to be playing offense for a change.

Q: *If there is a third Clinton administration, how much influence will Bill Clinton have in it, and in what areas of policy would Hillary Clinton allow her husband to play a decisive role?*

—Bruce Lewis

MT: Hillary Clinton says, as she told Tim Russert during a recent candidates' debate, that she never reveals the content of her discussions with her husband. I expect that if she is president, that will change. They may be husband and wife, but after all, it's not as if they're discussing whether there's milk in the fridge; they are, and will be, discussing public matters, and since he will clearly be a high-level de facto adviser, I think we'll be asking about the advice he gives.

Which is to say, I think he'll be involved in practically everything. Publicly, she has said that he may be a sort of roving ambassador, and obviously, given the positive feelings about him around the world, that would be a great role for him. But I would guess—indeed hope, considering that his political instincts are sharp—that he'll be involved in a lot of matters at both the strategic and policy levels.

Can you imagine, assuming the Democrats control Congress, having Bill Clinton to send up to the Hill to talk with Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi and their senior teams about pushing through legislation? Or let's say John Dingell doesn't retire. He might find Bill Clinton a tough person to say no to on mileage standards. In some ways it would be almost like a second presidency for him, albeit one conducted behind the scenes, and conducted with the benefit of having made all the rookie mistakes the first time around. It could be of enormous benefit to her and, to the extent that his presence will help her accomplish progressive goals on health care and such, the country.

That said, there are certain matters on which his position is more conservative than hers, or more in line with large financial interests, and those will bear watching. Mostly, here, I mean trade and labor issues. Hillary has inched out toward a position of free trade but with an asterisk, taking more seriously organized labor's demand that codicils specifying minimal labor standards be attached to all trade agreements. On other issues, like making the right to organize easier at US workplaces, labor will likely push her hard to move much faster than her husband did. There, his advice may be even more cautious than her instincts.

I expect Bill's public role will be limited. But he will advise her on everything.

Q: *In 2000, when Al Gore did not take office despite having received nearly 600,000 more votes than George W. Bush, it seemed axiomatic that there would be a movement to scrap the electoral college system. Yet no such movement has emerged. Can you see a viable path toward achieving this, and what do you see as the major obstacles to it?*

—Jim Ledbetter, Deputy Managing Editor, CNN Money

MT: There has been a mini-movement, but it obviously hasn't caught much fire. The idea behind the

movement is called the national popular vote. Under it, states whose electoral college votes total at least 270 (a majority) would sign a compact agreeing that they would give their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote. This is complicated, difficult to achieve, and a little strange. Say state X signed the compact, candidate A won state X, but candidate B won the national popular vote: state X would still be committed to giving its electoral college votes to candidate B.

So why would any state do this? Because such a system, in requiring a candidate to think of winning the popular vote as opposed to winning the electoral college, would force the candidate to campaign in more states. In the past half-century, according to studies, the number of electoral college votes that are truly up for grabs has nearly halved, from 345 to about 180. A national popular vote would open that back up and force candidates to campaign in states they don't much bother to campaign in now because they're either firmly red or blue.

One state, Maryland, has actually passed it into law. In Illinois, it has passed both houses of the state legislature. It has been introduced in thirty-five states and passed one or both houses in five others. But the push it really needs is from the large states that are either reliably blue or red, notably California, New York, and Texas, and its progress in those states has been limited.

Then, of course, there's the more recent news out of California about divvying up electoral college votes by congressional district. I don't count this as "reform" because this is obviously an attempt by conservative activists to seal next year's presidential election in the GOP's favor—that is, instead of winning all fifty-seven of California's electoral votes, the Democrat would win only those votes from the congressional districts he or she carries, which would probably amount to about thirty-five. Thus it's an automatic twenty-two more electoral votes for the Republican candidate.

Democratic and liberal political professionals in the state have recently organized a highly effective campaign against the initiative. For the time being, it appears to have collapsed. But if pro-initiative forces somehow manage to regroup and get the measure on the ballot next June, for an election in which turnout will be unusually low, and if it should pass, it will mean that in the general election the Democratic candidate will need to win every toss-up state plus either Ohio or Florida.

Notes

^[1] Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (PublicAffairs, 2007), reviewed in these pages, May 31, 2007.

on the election fever gripping Nepal as political parties start their Constituent Assembly Elections campaigns all over the country.
gv2019. A series of violent incidents and alleged instances of political intimidation in the past two weeks has had a dampening effect on Jamaica's pre-election fever (often called the "silly season") as the island prepares for general elections on February 25. Common crawl. Election fever has caught up with Lebanon as the country gears up for its June 7 parliamentary elections. UN-2. Election Fever is created to spread awareness about #Election. Keep active with us. See more of Election Fever on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Election Fever on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account?