

Barack Obama: power to the new creatives

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Barack Obama's success could hinge on the emergence of a cultured class of voters. Peter Culshaw reports

When John Major beat Neil Kinnock in 1992, The Sun newspaper boasted that "It Was The Sun Wot Won It". According to American sociologist Richard Florida, it was the "creative class" that swung victory for Barack Obama in the recent US Democratic nominations.

In Florida's definition, the "creative class" includes people working in the media, advertising, online, music and film industries, as well as designers, artists, and other, often freelance, creative workers who overwhelmingly supported Obama. Florida estimates that the rapidly growing creative class makes up around 12 per cent of the US population, or 15 million people, but insists that their political influence far outweighs their numbers.

"We are witnessing the first creative-class election in American history," he says.

"The creative class is an online class; it's YouTube, its MySpace, it's music. And no one has caught fire with this class like Obama."



Friends in creative places: Barack Obama with Bono

While pundits have looked endlessly at how the Democratic race was split along race, gender or education lines, Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto who has written a bestselling book *The Rise Of the Creative Class*, was more interested in "looking into how creative-class people were voting in this primary season."

advertisement On issue after issue, they preferred Barack Obama to Hillary Clinton or John McCain by wide margins".

The benefit for Obama of having this creative class onside is almost inestimable.

For a start, there were high profile music videos like Will.i.am's star-studded [Yes We Can](#) - a YouTube sensation, watched online by more than eight million viewers -- and [I got a crush on Obama](#) by a singer calling herself Obama Girl, both of which generated reams of free coverage for Obama.

Hundreds of less well-known videos also worked in his favour, reaching out to a wide variety of voters, from the hip-hop [Representin Obama](#) and the self-explanatory salsa song [Latinos for Barack Obama](#), to scores of indie, country, and folk tunes. The small number of Clinton and McCain videos were outnumbered and looked clunky, embarrassing and patronising in comparison.

An even more important key to Obama's victory was his success in using the web to fundraise, attracting more than a million small donors. While the policy differences between Clinton and Obama were not that huge, the idea of a candidate not in the pocket of corporate lobbyists added to Obama's appeal among the online community, creating a virtuous circle of support.

Matthew Yglesias, a blogger at [theAtlantic.com](#), says: "The people who support Obama want to talk about supporting him and want to link up with people who are also into him - that's why you are seeing such huge rallies."

Obama also gets kudos among the creative class for having penned two very well-written books. And for the more style-conscious, the fact that Obama is "the cool candidate", as Yglesias puts it, does him no harm either.

(As David Letterman said to Obama when he appeared on his chatshow, "That's a good suit you have on... an electable suit").

But can the creative class also swing a general election against John McCain? Florida's guess is that the election will be "very close", but that Obama might just win.

"He can bring in the African-Americans, the young, as well as the creative types in unprecedented numbers," he says. But he doubts Obama's ability to win over the white working class, since "the creative class anticipates the future, while the working class tends to seek protection from it".

The same may also hold true for older voters, for whom Obama's rhetoric of change can feel like a threat.

Nevertheless, Obama will certainly have the majority of old-style creative industries on his side, including most of Hollywood and the advertising industry, both of which are attracted by his shiny newness. Both industries will have a hand in the key battle to determine the image of the presidential candidates.

Will McCain be perceived more as a Bush clone or as a courageous maverick? Will Obama be made to look like a Harvard elitist whose patriotism is suspect, a man out of touch with ordinary Americans, or the empathetic visionary whose life story could have been (and no doubt will eventually be) scripted by Hollywood? This image battle will decide the election, as much as anything.

Obama's formidable fund-raising capacity on the web is likely to dwarf McCain's as it dwarfed Hillary Clinton's. Most of the top political websites, which get millions of daily hits and which often break the political news of the day - from the [Daily Kos](#) to the [Huffington Post](#) and Andrew Sullivan's [Daily Dish](#) - will be on Obama's side.

Whether the creative class can swing the presidential election or not, the political shift they have already helped bring about is hard to overestimate. Types, who a few years back might have been dismissed as arty trendies with a marginal impact on politics, have become an important key to electoral success.

As Florida puts it: "Just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt forged a new majority on the swelling ranks of blue-collar workers, so must the party that hopes to win this presidential election earn the enthusiastic support of today's ascending economic and political force - the creative class."

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