The Democratic Divide

By Jaime Mazza

Recently, I was chatting with some friends about choosing a topic for my Political Science paper on ideological perspectives. I was unsure of what topic to pick and they were trying to help me brainstorm. We drifted off of that subject when my friend, Kevin, whom I hadn’t seen in a while, made a joke. “Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you’d be in Iraq by now.” He was poking fun at me because I recently joined the Air National Guard and will be leaving in July to complete Basic Training and Security Forces Technical School at Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas. We laughed a bit and then I told him that my unit had just come back two weeks ago from a six month deployment in Iraq. They asked me, as several other people have, if I’m going to have to go over there. I gave them the truth. “Although, it may not be soon, the answer is yes.” Kevin chimed in, “If McCain is in office.” I went on to tell them about how when I first joined I went to tell my parents what I had done. My parents are conservative Republicans and I am confident that they will be voting for McCain. As a Democrat, I generally try to avoid too much talk of politics to maintain family peace. But they expressed some worry about the job choice I picked and so I joked, “Well, if you don’t want me in Iraq you’d better vote for Obama.” At this point in telling my friends this story Kevin said, “Oh, well, we better end this conversation there.” Then I realized that I was standing between Kevin, who’s a Clinton fan, and my friend Steve, who is backing Obama. So I asked Kevin why he doesn’t like Obama. “I just don’t like him. He’s a first term senator with no experience and no friends.” “No friends?” I asked. “You want to know that there are going to be strong people in the cabinet. Hillary has made those connections.” Then my friend Steve counters, “Yes, but isn’t he much like Kennedy? He came in as a young senator with big ideas.” Kevin agreed but went on to say that the Kennedy years weren’t all golden.

I voted in the primaries and am swaying to one side, but, while standing between Steve and Kevin my paper topic choice came to light. Initially I worried that comparing Clinton and Obama wouldn’t be fresh or interesting. While I am very interested in politics in religion I thought I might do something about the Christian coalition. But after having that talk with my friends I started asking myself questions. What are the real differences between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama? Is it really going be a race “determined by intangibles: image, charisma, and personality?” (Curry). What issues are the people focusing on? Through this piece I hope to explore these questions and find out where the dividing line falls for American Democrats like my two friends Steve and Kevin.

Taking a look at each candidate’s votes in the Senate is a good starting point for determining differences--although, with only a short time in the Senate, there is less to show for Obama (which has been a point of criticism for many Hillary enthusiasts). Many of the candidates’ Senate votes have been in agreement including voting against confirming Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito. Both would have supported a filibuster to block a confirmation vote on Alito, if Democratic leaders had tried to mount one. Each voted against an amendment to this year’s Senate...
immigration bill that would have denied legal status to those who had entered the United States illegally.

Obama and Clinton have also disagreed on a few issues since the beginning of 2005, such as a mandate forcing automakers to achieve 40 mile-per-gallon average fuel economy by the year 2017. Obama voted for that mandate, Clinton against it, and the Senate rejected it in a vote of 67 to 28. On Congressional Quarterly's tally of how often senators support Bush’s positions on issues coming before the Senate, in 2005 Clinton earned a 31 out of 100 rating (with 100 meaning totally supportive of Bush) and Obama got a 33. On the National Journal scale of liberal to conservative positions, again based on roll call votes in 2005, Obama rated an 82.5 (meaning he was more liberal than 82.5 percent of his Senate colleagues) and Clinton a 79.8 (Curry).

The similarities in the Senate votes are equally reflected in each candidate’s perspective statements on the individual issues (“Compare the Candidates”). From foreign affairs to social security many of their policies are the same. While both call for a universal health care plan, they don’t agree on how this should work. There has been great scrutiny of Obama’s plan sparked by Clinton last November when she argued that it would leave uninsured as many as 15 million of the estimated 47 million Americans without coverage (“Clinton denounces…”). This may be a cornerstone for this party since polls report that healthcare policy is a primary interest of Democratic voters.

One useful dividing line, for many Democrats, is the Iraq war. The fact that Senator Obama opposed the war from its very outset counters the mark against Senator Clinton for giving Bush’s plan the initial go ahead. As the debate heats up, Clinton has not hesitated to state that she is the only candidate capable of ending this war. "One candidate will continue the war and keep the troops in Iraq indefinitely. One candidate only says he will end the war," she said while campaigning in Pennsylvania. "And one candidate is ready, willing and able to end the war and to rebuild our military while honoring our soldiers and our veterans" (“Clinton Challenges…”). While both have an Iraq plan that is under the watchful eyes of Americans, some are challenging how realistic it is to promise a full troop removal within sixteen months, as Obama is doing. While those that strongly oppose any troop involvement may support this, the logistics of whether it can actually be pulled off are not completely substantiated nor could they be until the attempt is made. This certainly has brought up some doubt for Democrats who are unsure of whether this freshman Senator will be able to come through.

With such similar ideologies many feel that the difference lies in the presence projected by these two candidates. Garth Corriveau, a Democratic activist and Manchester, N.H. attorney has said that the biggest difference between the two “appears to be judgment versus experience: Senator Obama’s media blitz portrays him as the candidate for change — youthful and charismatic — he even took a page from the Clinton handbook using ‘Hope’ in his book title. Senator Clinton is an accomplished senator, master political tactician and invaluable asset to the party.” Another New Hampshire Democrat, former congressional candidate Mary Rauh, said, “We’re longing for leadership.” In her view, neither Obama nor Clinton, “both fairly new in the Senate,”
had necessarily had opportunities to show leadership. But she added, "It seems to me Obama’s ability to communicate says potentially there’s a leader there." She said it is Obama’s attractiveness and eloquence that causes some people concern. “That’s what some people worry a bit about — the glamour rather than the substance” (Putnam).

According to Colleen McCain-Nelson reporting for the *Dallas Morning News*, “It’s electability that matters, Democrats have decided”. Determined to derail the Republican nominee, Democrats are developing a big-picture approach that looks beyond the primaries and considers who can deliver votes in November. The staunch "anti-war" voters say they are willing to bypass candidates whose views are more palatable or whose personalities are more likable in favor of the candidate they deem most electable. Both Senators Clinton and Obama favor a military pullout from the “war on terrorism.” With McCain supporting the war for the long haul, deciphering which Democrat can win the votes of Republicans that aren’t supporting McCain seems to be the question. "The ability to beat McCain is very important," said Jason Nodler, an Albuquerque, N.M., resident (McCain-Nelson). What constitutes electability is open to debate, but voters say they know it when they see it. Colleen McCain Nelson calls it “a candidate’s EQ : electability quotient. It’s a mix of experience, political views and personality. Throw in a dash of geography and a sprinkle of momentum, and you have a candidate who can win” (McCain-Nelson).

With Clinton trailing Obama for delegates, each candidate is fighting to stand above the other. A race that started out peacefully has now entered the stage where the candidates are waiting eagerly for the other to make a misstep. Obama is biting his tongue now over a comment he made saying that some small-town Pennsylvanians are "bitter" people who "cling to guns and religion." Clinton jumped on that immediately and used the foible to her aid by saying, “Senator Obama’s remarks are elitist and out of touch. They are not reflective of values and beliefs of Americans, certainly not the Americans I know, not the Americans I grew up with, not the Americans I lived with in Arkansas or represent in New York (“Obama: I didn’t say it…”).” There is speculation that putting these seemingly over analyzed comments under the microscope does have an effect on voters. How much the portrayal of image effects the popular vote is unclear. But, it can be assumed that the politically seasoned “Super Delegates” will see past all of the mudslinging. With such a close division of electoral votes, unless one of the two Democrat candidates withdraws, it appears that it will be them making the decision for the party’s candidate in the end.

Despite the tension between camps, the days are counting down to the final moments. Some say that the unity of the Democratic Party has been compromised by such a lengthy race between the two candidates. Many feel that the time is past for the Party to have selected a candidate. But, due to the Democratic system of our United States government, every man and woman gets to have his/her voice, even if those voices result in what I’d call a temporary stalemate. In my opinion, the fact that the Party has come down to two very similar choices shows that, indeed, the Party does know what it wants. Now it just needs to decide who should put these policies into action. Both Senators take very similar standpoints on the issues. Both Senators provide an alternative for those that object the plans proposed by John McCain. And
extraordinarily, both candidates, an African-American and a female, represent groundbreaking progress for our nation. Although the party may be torn for now, with confidence, it will come together to support the candidate that will best represent the Democratic Party. Then, my friends, Steve and Kevin will rip off the last pages of their “Bush-isms” calendars. And the Democrats will have to unite and face their real challenge, and the real race: deciding the future of the United States of America.

Works Cited


