

10

POLITICAL UNDERDOGMA

“Obama calls himself underdog.”

—*Politico*, Mike Allen, October 16, 2007

“[Hillary] Clinton seeks to cast herself as underdog vs Obama.”

—Reuters, Caren Bohan, February 10, 2008

“John McCain, Reprising the Underdog Role.”

—*Washington Post*, Michael D. Shear,
September 4, 2007

“I’m way the underdog.”

—John Edwards, NBC, January 26, 2008

“Mitt Romney: I’m the Underdog.”

—*New York Times*, December 13, 2007

“I like feeling like I’m an underdog.”

—Rudy Giuliani, “Rudy Relishes Underdog Role,” *MSNBC First Read*, January 26, 2008

THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY DEFINES AN underdog as “a loser or predicted loser in a struggle or contest.” So, if a politician’s goal is to win elections (and, make no mistake, that is his or her goal), why do so many politicians

clamor to portray themselves as underdogs?

A University of South Florida study, “The Advantage of Disadvantage: Underdogs in Politics,” gave two groups of test subjects near-identical Barack Obama speeches. The only difference: one group’s speech described Barack Obama as a front-runner, and the other described him as an underdog.

“I know that I am not the favorite in this race [**I know that some early polls show that I’m the favorite in this race**]. As an underdog [**the front-runner**], my star is not quite that bright just yet [**there will be high expectations for my candidacy**]. However, I believe these serious times demand serious people who have real world experience in solving the challenges we face. I humbly believe I’m the best equipped to meet these challenges.”

—“The Advantage of Disadvantage,” Nadav Goldshmeid & Joseph Vandello, 2009

The study found “the underdog label can reap benefits for politicians,” “the underdog label is regarded positively,” and “underdogs are seen as warmer and more likeable than frontrunners.”¹ These findings are supported by earlier studies, including Fleitas (1971), in which voters demonstrated “a significant shift in favor of the underdog,” and Ceci and Kain (1982), in which “participants who were told [Jimmy] Carter was leading in the polls were more likely to express a preference for [Ronald] Rea-

¹ “The Advantage of Disadvantage,” Nadav Goldshmeid & Joseph Vandello, 2009

gan, while those exposed to a Reagan-lead poll aligned themselves with Carter.”²

While academic studies are helpful, they pale in comparison to real, hands-on political experience. George Washington Plunkitt, one of the winningest politicians in history, said, “some young men think they can learn how to be successful in politics from books, and they cram their heads with all sorts of college rot. They couldn’t make a bigger mistake.”³ As someone who has helped hundreds of politicians win elections over the years, I can tell you that the reason why so many politicians embrace the underdog label is because it works. This chapter will show you **why** it works, **how** it works—and give you a side-by-side **comparison** of two real-life underdog campaigns.

“Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is of the most imperious and unsociable nature, since the pride of one man requires the submission of the multitude.”

—*The History of the Decline and Fall Of The Roman Empire: Volume 1*, Edward Gibbon, 1806

WHY POLITICAL UNDERDOGMA WORKS

First, a warning: if you want to hold on to your belief that politics is about anything other than power, I recommend that you skip to the next chapter or put this book down. Politicians *require* power. An artist without an audience is still an artist. A politician without power is nothing. I have never met a politician who did not want to “do

² Ibid

³ George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall

good” while in power. But all of their good intentions will add up to nothing unless they get into power in the first place (by winning elections) and then stay in power (by winning re-election). This is the art and science of acquiring and holding on to power. An election is, at its core, a transfer of power from voters to politicians, from the people to the state. When politicians ask you for your vote, they are asking you to cede some of your personal power to them—power over your income, finances, taxes, your personal and national security, your child’s education, your environment (including the air you breathe, the water you drink, and the land you walk upon), your retirement, your freedom (by empowering them to set and enforce laws and hand down punishment)—even power over your health, and your very life. If you do not believe that politics and elections are about power, you are not alone. More than half of the politicians I have helped lead to victory did not understand the basic nature of their chosen profession, which is to win and hold on to power. Whether you, or they, accept it or not does not make it any less true. Politics is about power.

The reason why Underdogma is so prevalent in politics is because Underdogma and politics are both about power. Few people understood this better than the man “who operated the most successful and long-running urban political machine in American history,”⁴ George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall.

⁴ *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, William L. Riordon, 1963

“Plunkitt is compellingly honest about the true lure of politics—first and foremost the desire to hold and wield power.”

—*Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*,

William L. Riordon, 1963

Tammany Hall was the “political machine that dominated New York City politics from the mayoral victory of Fernando Wood in 1854 through the election of Fiorello LaGuardia in 1934.”⁵ If a week is an eternity in politics, then the eighty-year electoral reign of Tammany Hall was a heck of a long time. And the man in charge of Tammany Hall’s Election Committee was its chairman, George Washington Plunkitt.

Plunkitt understood the power dynamic of politics. Politicians are in the business of asking everyday people to hand over a portion of their power. When engaged in transactions of power, politicians must understand how different the transaction looks—and how different politicians look—in the eyes of the people (the voters) who are ceding their power. Voters are not apt to hand their power over to people they dislike. And most voters dislike big, powerful overdogs. That is one of the reasons why politicians play the underdog card, because it gives voters the *perception* that the power gap between voter and politician has closed, or at least narrowed. The *actual* gap will always be there, but Underdogmatist politicians seek to narrow your perception of that gap by convincing you that they are “just like you.”

⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site

“Make the poorest man in your district feel that he is your equal, or even a bit superior to you.”

—George Washington Plunkitt, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, William L. Riordon, 1963

“In order to become the master, the politician poses as the servant.”

—Charles de Gaulle

The truth is: politicians are not “just like you.” You do not have handlers. Other people do not write your “spontaneous” remarks. You comb your own hair. You cannot raise tens of millions of dollars to promote a product that is you. And you are not in the business of seeking power. Politicians are not like you. But they work overtime to create the illusion that they are.

“I grew up on Pinochle and the American dream.”

—Hillary Clinton TV ad “Scranton,” 2008

Here is what CNN Money revealed about the 2008 Presidential hopefuls listed at the beginning of this chapter, all of whom played the underdog card, in a December 7, 2007, piece entitled “Millionaires-in-Chief.”

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE	NET WORTH
Barack Obama	\$1.3 million
Hillary Clinton	\$34.9 million
John McCain	\$40.4 million
John Edwards	\$54.7 million

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE	NET WORTH
Mitt Romney	\$202 million
Rudy Giuliani	\$52.2 million
Average American	\$11,000

A November 2009 Roll Call study found 125 millionaires in Congress, with the average wealth of its members pegged at \$2.28 million (compared to the \$11,000 net worth of the average American).⁶ That means the average member of Congress has 207 times the net worth of the average American, and the six “underdog” 2008 Presidential candidates had 5,840 times the net worth of the average American. These are the same people who haul CEOs before Congress to explain the gap between CEO pay and worker pay, and who instituted a “Pay Czar” to limit executive earnings. When asked how politicians get away with such dizzying chutzpa, political scientist Eric Herzik replied, “that’s the art of politics.”⁷

The “art” of Political Underdogma, in addition to helping politicians close the perceived power gap between themselves and voters, also gives politicians numerous tactical advantages at election time.

- **GET OUT THE VOTE.** Underdog campaigns find it easier to get their supporters to vote, due to a built-in sense of urgency

⁶ “Capital in the Capitol,” Roll Call, November 30, 2009

⁷ Ibid

and insurgency (underdog supporter: “They need my vote”) compared to front-runners, who tend to struggle in this area (overdog supporter: “They probably don’t need my vote, they’ll win anyway”).

- **REDUCE EXPECTATIONS.** When a front-runner wins, it is expected. When an underdog wins, it is front-page news (AKA: free “earned media”). When a front-runner wins by a lower-than-expected margin, it is a setback. When an underdog loses, but comes closer than expected, it is a victory (see Bill Clinton’s 1992 loss in the New Hampshire primary, after which he declared himself to be “the comeback kid” before riding a wave of momentum all the way to the White House).
- **MEDIA FAVORS UNDERDOGS/MEDIA TARGETS FRONTRUNNERS.** Media, like the rest of us, tends to side with underdogs. But that is not the only reason why underdogs get an easier ride from the press. Another reason is that underdog insurgencies are dramatic, which makes for good TV. Also, a close race creates more drama, which translates into higher ratings and is one reason why media tends to beat down front-runners and lift up underdogs. Underdogs are also seen as less threatening because they are farther away from the reins of power than more powerful front-running candidates (see the Ross Perot/Jesse Ventura comparison later in this chapter).

HOW POLITICAL UNDERDOGMA WORKS

In the power transaction we call “voting,” one of the most important questions a voter asks before pulling the lever is: “which candidate is most like me?” The truth, as we have already established, is that none of them are like you. But, since voters tend to reflexively scorn big, powerful overdogs and reflexively side with less powerful underdogs, politicians must close the perceived power gap in order to create the illusion that they are just like you.

How? One of the best ways to learn how something works is to examine those times when it does not work. Like the time the elitist millionaire John Kerry tried, and failed, to close the power gap between himself and voters in order to convince Americans that he was “just like” them in the 2004 Presidential campaign. “Empathy is everything in modern politics,” observed Chris Cillizza of the *Washington Post*, “and there is no better way for a politician to show it than fluency in the language of local food...John Kerry’s request for Swiss cheese rather than Cheez Whiz on his cheese steak at a stop in Philadelphia during the 2004 campaign cemented the public’s view of him as an out-of-touch Brahmin.”⁸ Candidate John Kerry also tried (and failed) to appear “just like” Ohio sportsmen, but he was jeered when he put on a fake backwoods accent and asked a local store owner, “can I get me a hunting license here?”⁹ He even tried to appear “just like” black people by saying that he would like to become America’s

⁸ “Me? I Vote For the Cheez Whiz,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2006

⁹ “When Johnny Went A-Huntin,” *Washington Times*, October 23, 2004

second “black president”¹⁰ and by professing his love for hip-hop.

“President Clinton was often known as the first black president. I wouldn’t be upset if I could earn the right to be the second.”

—John Kerry, quoted in *Talon News*,
March 9, 2004

“I’m fascinated by rap and by hip-hop. I think there’s a lot of poetry in it.”

—John Kerry, MTV’s “Choose or Lose” forum,
as reported in *Time* magazine, April 5, 2004

The problem for John Kerry and Underdogmatists is that their underdog-loving “Player-Hater” rhetoric is directly at odds with the philosophical core of hip-hop. One might even say they are as different as black and white.

KERRY (UNDERDOGMATISTS)	RAPPERS
SCAPEGOAT THE RICH “They [Republicans] have catered to the wealth of the richest instead of honoring the work of the rest of us.” —2004 Democratic Platform	CELEBRATE THE RICH “Ohhh money, you my honey Money is my bitch Ohhh money, money, money, Yeah yeah that bitch treat me like a trick Ohhh money you my honey, she says without her I can’t be rich.” —Nas, “Money is my Bitch,” 2004

¹⁰ John Kerry on the American Urban Radio Network, March 1, 2004

KERRY (UNDERDOGMATISTS)	RAPPERS
<p>AGAINST GAS-GUZZLING SUVs (SPECIFICALLY HUMMERS)</p> <p>“We need to repeal the outrageous one hundred thousand dollar tax break for the purchase of luxury gas-guzzlers like Hummers.” —John Kerry, Environmental Policy Address, University of New Hampshire, October 20, 2003</p>	<p>FOR GAS-GUZZLING SUVs (SPECIFICALLY HUMMERS)</p> <p>“26-inch chrome spokes on the Hummer This heat gon last for the whole summer Running your bitch faster than the Road Runner.” —Lloyd Banks, “On Fire,” 2004</p>
<p>ARROGANCE IS BAD</p> <p>“Arrogance and pride stand in the way of common sense and integrity.” —John Kerry speech, Washington D.C., September 30, 2003</p>	<p>ARROGANCE IS GOOD</p> <p>“Now I could let these dream killers kill my self-esteem Or use my arrogance as the steam to power my dreams.” —Jay-Z & Kanye West, “Last Call,” 2004</p>

continued on following page . . .

continued from previous page . . .

<div>KERRY (UNDERDOGMATISTS)</div>		<div>RAPPERS</div>	
<div>AGAINST GUNS</div>		<div>FOR GUNS</div>	
<p>“I would rather be the candidate of the NAACP than the NRA.” —John Kerry statement, November 1, 2003</p>		<p>“D-R-E! A mutherfu*#er who’s known for carryin’ gats And kick raps that make snaps. If you see me on the solo moves best believe that I’m strapped. 44, .38 or AK 47.” —Dr. Dre, “A Nigga Witta Gun,” 2001</p>	
<div>WOMEN AND MEN ARE EQUAL</div>		<div>WOMEN AND MEN ARE UNEQUAL</div>	
<p>“He [John Kerry] made women’s issues part of the debate and established his commitment to the fight for equality and justice.” —National Organization for Women (NOW) press release, October 14, 2004</p>		<p>“Back in the day, I use to like bitches But I’ll tell you now days, Bitches ain’t \$hit.” —Nate Dogg, Lil Jon, “Bitches Ain’t \$hit,” 2004</p>	

CNN’s Candy Crowley summed up John Kerry’s inability to bridge the power gap with voters when she recalled a breakfast she had with Kerry at the Holiday Inn in Dubuque, Iowa.

“I’d like to start out with some green tea,’ Kerry told the waitress, who stared at him for a moment before responding, ‘We have Lipton’s.’

‘There were many green tea instances [Crowley said]. There’s a very large disconnect between the Washington politicians and most of America and how they live. Bush was able to bridge that gap, and Kerry was not.’”

—*Palm Beach Post*, November 16, 2004

While some politicians fail spectacularly at playing the underdog card, other politicians succeed in convincing you that they are “just like” you. Here are some of the ways they do it:

- **INTRODUCING YOU TO THEIR FAMILIES.** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 78% of Americans live in “families”¹¹ of some sort, which gives politicians a 78% chance of forging some kind of connection with you by demonstrating themselves to be “family people.”
- **SURROUNDING THEMSELVES WITH PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE YOU.** Campaign event coordinators work hard to ensure that the faces in their candidate’s “human backdrops” look like you. Occasionally, this tactic backfires, as it did for the Obama campaign when Obama event planners were caught tweaking the racial mix of their human backdrop

¹¹ Family Status and Household Relationship of People 15 Years and Over, by Marital Status, Age, and Sex: 2009

and were overheard saying, “get me more white people, we need more white people.”¹²

- **DRESSING LIKE YOU.** Politicians wear blue jeans in rural areas, hardhats in factories, and roll up their sleeves, just like you, when it’s time to “get the job done.”
- **TALKING LIKE YOU.** Political operatives spend millions of dollars on focus groups to test the resonance of language and slogans on people who are “just like you.” Sometimes, they even pluck their winning language and slogans from the mouths of everyday people in these focus groups. This, too, can back-fire horribly, like the time Hillary Clinton affected a cringe-worthy southern drawl while speaking at a church in Selma, Alabama (see the video at www.under-dogma.com).

Scott Brown, the underdog Senatorial candidate from Massachusetts, shocked the world in January 2010 by snatching “Ted Kennedy’s seat” away from the big, powerful, “machine” Democrat front-runner Martha Coakley. Brown was so much of an underdog that few people across the country knew that the Republicans even had a dog in the race, let alone a chance of winning, until a few weeks before election day. Scott Brown did not run a traditional underdog campaign, but his ads did follow the four Political Underdogma “just like you” techniques described in this chapter. He introduced voters to his family, especially to his two daughters—one of whom was an underdog contestant on *American Idol*. His TV ad “Hey Dad” featured

¹² *The Tartan*, April 7, 2008

Scott Brown driving his “just like you” GM pickup truck (with 200,000 miles on it) to meet voters (who probably drove nicer vehicles). He surrounded himself with people who were “just like you” in his “People’s Rally” and in his commercials. He dressed just like you in most of his ads, wearing sweaters, well-worn jackets—even a silly “dad-style” Christmas tie in his Christmas video (which also featured his two dogs—another good “just like you” move, considering that “74 percent of people like dogs a lot”¹³). And Scott Brown certainly talked like you, right up until the end of his campaign and in his final TV spot, which featured the candidate talking *like* everyday people to everyday people:

“We’re right here in the middle of Southie [South Boston], meeting and greeting.”

“Go get ’em.”

“Tell ’em I said ‘hi,’ huh?”

“Thank you very much—and the dogs, too!”

The political underdog insurgency of Scott Brown was so successful that, when he passed the once-powerful overdog candidate Martha Coakley in the polls, Coakley fought back the only way she knew how: she played the underdog card. Poorly and obviously.

“Coakley casts herself as underdog, ‘Rocky’ theme and all: State Attorney General Martha Coakley embraced the ultimate underdog’s theme song in

¹³ “Do Americans Like Dogs or Cats Best? No Contest: Dogs Win, Cats are Most Disliked,” Associated Press, January 7, 2010

the final hours of her campaign: ‘Gonna Fly Now,’
the recurring soundtrack from the ‘Rocky’ movies.”

—*Washington Post*, January 18, 2010

The ultimate American political underdog was, of course, Bill Clinton, who played the underdog card perfectly. The “Man from Hope” talked more about his humble beginnings than about his education at Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale. He even turned a New Hampshire primary loss into an Underdogmatist victory that led him all the way to the White House by rebranding his loss to Paul Tsongas as an underdog victory and calling himself the “comeback kid.” And when scandal broke (and broke, and broke), Clinton revived the underdog image to successfully weather the storms, painting himself as besieged on all sides by powerful adversaries (or, as his wife phrased it, a “vast right-wing conspiracy”). Bill Clinton’s skills in this area were unparalleled, and he made two unique contributions to the politician’s “just like you” arsenal:

“I feel your pain.”

“I stumble and fall, just like you, and then I apologize.”

POLITICAL UNDERDOG CAMPAIGNS— A COMPARISON

When I first met Governor Jesse Ventura in 2001, what struck me most was not that we were both in politics, nor that we had both met with the Dalai Lama (Ventura used his time with the Dalai Lama to ask him if he had ever seen *Caddyshack*). What I remember most was his answer

to a question about Minnesota entrepreneurs. Governor Ventura chose to single out for praise Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis (Minneapolis dance music producers for Janet Jackson, Michael Jackson, Prince, Mary J. Blige, and others). As a former dance music producer myself, I was the only person in the room who knew what the heck Jesse was talking about. The Governor was oblivious to the gap that existed between himself and the handful of business leaders in the room. This former Navy SEAL/flamboyant wrestler turned governor was the direct opposite of John Kerry. Instead of being above his audience, he was below them. A real-life underdog.

A few years earlier, in 1998, Jesse Ventura had surprised political pundits when he got elected as Minnesota's thirty-eighth governor. Six years before that, in 1992, Ross Perot went from outsider businessman to outright leader in a three-way race for the U.S. Presidency—a mere six months before the election. And yet only one of these political underdogs won—which makes their campaigns fertile grounds for studying Political Underdogma.

In the week before Jesse Ventura's surprise gubernatorial victory in November 1998, two separate polls showed Ventura languishing in third place behind his Democratic and Republican rivals. Ross Perot followed an opposite trajectory, achieving front-runner status even before he declared his candidacy, only to falter and come in third behind Democrat Bill Clinton and former President George H.W. Bush.

The Ventura and Perot campaigns are microcosms of what can happen when political underdogs become overdogs.

In June of 1992, less than six months before the Presidential election, Ross Perot led the polls with 39% of public support, a full eight points ahead of then-sitting President George Bush and fourteen points ahead of the Democratic challenger, Governor Bill Clinton. The underdog had chewed through his collar and was making a legitimate

run for the Presidency. It was then that everything began to change for Ross Perot.

To see a growing library of political ads including Scott Brown's "JFK" ad, Jesse Ventura's "Action Figure" ad, Hillary Clinton's "Pinochle" ad and others, visit Underdogma's POLITICAL THREAD at www.under-dogma.com.

Republican and Democratic operatives unleashed wave after wave of negative attacks aimed squarely at upstart Perot. In today's world, these attacks seem tame. The ad that reminded voters that Perot once called African-Americans

"you people" in a speech to the NAACP is a far cry from the multimillion-dollar ad campaign against George W. Bush in 2000, in which Bush was "tied directly to a vicious racist lynching."¹⁴

"Over black and white video of a pickup truck dragging a chain, the daughter of Texas dragging death victim James Byrd declares, 'So when Gov. George W. Bush refused to sign hate crimes legislation, it was like my father was killed all over again.'"

—Media Research Center, October 31, 2000

¹⁴ "Liberal Dirty Tricks Ignored," Media Research Center, October 31, 2000

Sure, Ross Perot was an unstable candidate who had bad policies, lacked discipline, and was quick to anger. But so was his Reform Party brother, Jesse Ventura. And yet Jesse won. Why did voters abandon Perot? Part of the reason was simple: he broke the Underdogmatist covenant with his supporters. Ross Perot stopped being the underdog. Part of the reason why Jesse Ventura won is that he never stopped being the underdog. He never led in the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial polls, which meant that those who rooted for the underdog had (they thought) a safe place to park their votes. As sixty-nine-year-old voter Jan Norstad explained, two weeks before the election:

“I don’t think there is a chance in hell that Jesse Ventura is going to win. I do want to show that he has support. If it was close, I would vote for [Democrat candidate Hubert H.] Humphrey.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 19, 1998

Letting Underdogma sway votes is one thing. But when it leads some human beings to call for the extermination of other human beings, Underdogma becomes serious and even deadly, as you will see in Part 3—Underdogma on the World Stage, starting with Chapter 11—TWO LEGS? TOO BAD!: ARE OVERDOG HUMANS A “CANCER” OF THE EARTH?