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What can other leaders learn from Obama?

By Louis Perron

The world is fascinated as Barack Obama officially takes power as president of the United States. Politicians and candidates around the globe have carefully observed the campaign and quite a few want to be like him.

However, one can easily look silly when copying American campaign techniques. This does not mean that one cannot get inspiration from the Obama success, however. After all, there are some obvious parallels between the U.S. and Japan. Both countries are in deep economic problems and both have a very unpopular incumbent. So what tools, strategies and tactics out of the Obama toolkit would really work in Japan? How can Japanese politicians convince, mobilize and sell like Obama?

Some observers think that the impressive thing about the Obama campaign is how it used the Internet and other new technology—8,000 Internet groups and 1.5 million Internet volunteers are indeed impressive. But that's only one part of the story. Politicians often think that a campaign means to produce things such as TV spots, leaflets or websites. In reality, however, a campaign can and should be seen as a series of decisions regarding the message, the strategy, fund-raising and products. The Obama campaign made these decisions early on and implemented them with great discipline. That's the real secret of his success.

Politicians often think of a message as a slogan, in most cases nothing more than an empty motherhood statement. However, a good message is more than a slogan yet less than a party program. It's the reason we give people to vote for one side and not for one of the other sides. In the case of Obama, this was the message: "Barack Obama will bring the change that America desperately needs. He will get the economy going again, not only for Wall Street but also for Main Street. In concrete terms, this means tax cuts for 95% of Americans and expanded health-care. John McCain on the other hand will continue the failed policies of George W Bush. It's time for a new hope and to leave the divisiveness behind us. Yes, we can!"

Every ad, every speech, everything that the campaign produced communicated that message. It was then summarized in a catchy slogan: change we can believe in and change we need. There was probably no one left in the country who did not know what Obama stood for.

This methodology can be translated everywhere in the world. Of course, in Japan, the content of the message would be different and communicated in a much more implicit and subtle way. Based on my experience in Asia, how something is said and what is not said is as important as what is said. But the tool is nevertheless the same. Everywhere in the world, a party or candidate needs to communicate to voters a reason that is short, believable, relevant and showing contrast.

The Obama message as stated above is all of that. In a setting with an incumbent, the election is basically a referendum over the incumbent. What an incumbent like Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso needs to do is to communicate to voters what he has done and what he plans to do for them in the future. Vulnerable incumbents that end up surviving all show aggressive differences with the challenger. George W Bush in 2004, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2004 and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1994 are only a few examples.

The message in such a setting is basically that: no matter how bad things are now, they will get worse with the challenger. As for the challenger, he needs to do two things in terms of message: 1) make the case that the incumbent needs to be replaced, and 2) make voters comfortable with the idea of change. Obama and other successful challengers around the world in the past 20 years such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva did exactly that. Change was defined as improving current conditions and not as a paradigm shift of values. Obama had an entire series of measures to achieve that: he counterbalanced his call for change with optimistic rhetoric, made repeated, passionate calls for unity, he focused on the economy and he nominated a moderate, senior vice president.

What's impressive in the case of Obama is the coherence, with which he defined himself and the discipline, with which the message was communicated. In my personal experience, European and Asian politicians focus too much on products and funds, and not enough about message, strategy and discipline. As we have seen, the strategy paid off for Obama.

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