



## The mystery in the voting booth

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The know-it-alls, it turns out, didn't know it all.

Months of predictions to the contrary notwithstanding, the presidential nominations *weren't* all sewn up on Super Tuesday. John McCain *didn't* put it away. Mike Huckabee *hasn't* been reduced to political irrelevancy. Once again -- as with earlier forecasts of Hillary Clinton's implosion in New Hampshire, Rudy Giuliani's commanding national appeal, and Mitt Romney's untouchable leads in the early states -- the politicians proposed but the voters disposed.

In the final hours of his 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton spoke repeatedly of the "great mystery of American democracy," by which an ordinary voter is transformed on Election Day into "the most power-

ful citizen in America." I haven't agreed with Clinton on much, but he was on to something that day. For all the sophisticated tools and technology with which modern candidates wage their campaigns, what happens in the voting booth is still, so often, a mystery.

Part of that mystery is just what a candidate needs to pass the voters' threshold test of presidential believability. On paper, Romney seemed to have all the necessary ingredients: brilliant private-sector success, a spotless and wholesome personal life, ample gifts of intelligence and charm, proven appeal to Blue State voters, extremely deep pockets, and the benefits of massive advertising.

Yet at no point in this seemingly endless campaign has he managed to dominate the Republican race.

Instead he finds himself fighting to catch up not just to McCain, whose campaign was all but abandoned for dead last summer, but even, in some states, to Huckabee.

What is it that pushes a candidate over that threshold of viability? Is it powerful media support? For weeks, many of the most influential voices on the right, especially on talk radio, have lacerated McCain, derided Huckabee, and fervently championed Romney. Yet voters in state after state yesterday ignored the talkers, choosing McCain or Huckabee over the former Massachusetts governor.

Is it the "right" stand on issues that makes or breaks a candidate? Issues are obviously of great significance, yet they don't seem to be the key to this year's campaign, either. Andrew Kohut, head of polling for the

Pew Research Center, told the Wall Street Journal yesterday that in the race between Clinton and Barack Obama, "there is no correlation in the exit polls so far between the issues people think are important and the candidates they vote for." Among Republicans surveyed, McCain has often been the least likely to share voters' positions on issues. For all that, he has become the frontrunner in the GOP race.

All theories about the presidential race should be treated as suspect, but here in a nutshell is mine: Voters this year are seeking character. More than popularity, more than ideological compatibility, what they crave is a candidate of honor, integrity, and decency. Perhaps that is why McCain and Obama continue to ride high, when so many others have left the field.