

5. Obama's campaign for the presidency 2004-2009

5.1 The Importance of the political career of Barack Obama to 2004

Key dates:

- 1961 – Barack Obama is born in Honolulu, Hawaii
- 1983 – Receives a BA in Political Science from Columbia University, New York
- 1985 – Moves to Chicago and works as a community organiser
- 1988 – Enrols at Harvard Law School
- 1990 – Is elected editor of *Harvard Law Review* (first black American to do so)
- 1992 – Marries Michelle Robinson
- 1993 – Begins lecturing at University of Chicago Law School and works at a law firm
- 1995 – Mother dies of cancer, aged 52; Obama's first book, *Dreams from My Father*, is published
- 1996 – Elected to the Illinois state senate
- 1998 – Re-elected to the Illinois state senate (second term)
- 2000 – Loses Illinois Democratic primary election for US House of Representatives seat
- 2002 – Re-elected to the Illinois state senate (third term)
- 2004 – Gives keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention; Elected to the US Senate (Illinois – Dem)
- 2006 – Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, is published
- 2008 – June: Wins Democratic Party presidential primary election process
- 2008 – August: Is officially nominated at the Democratic nominee
- 2008 – 4 November 2008: Elected 44th president of the United States
- 2009 – 20 January: Inaugurated as president

Obama's early life

Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961, just two years after it was admitted to the US as a state. Obama's father was from **Kenya** and his mother was from **Kansas**. His parents married in February 1961 and divorced in 1964, when Barack was two years old. Shortly after, his father returned to Kenya.

In the 1980s Obama became a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ, a Christian Church. This would come under scrutiny in 2008 when videos emerged of its pastor, Reverend

Jeremiah Wright, speaking critically of about the United States. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Wright said:

“We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye... and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought back into our own front yards. America’s chickens are coming home to roost.”

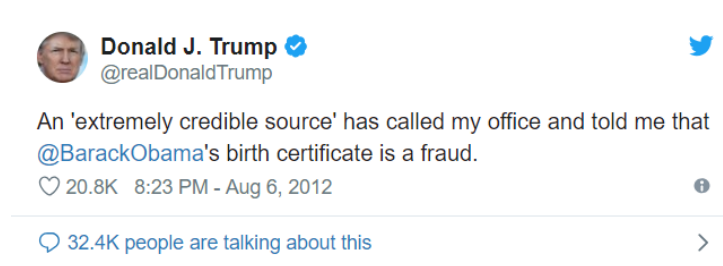
This caused significant discomfort for the then Democratic nominee and he had to address his relationship with Wright in a speech during the campaign.

Obama was also later subject to questions about both his birth certificate (had he been born outside the US he would not be eligible to stand for president) and his faith. His middle name, Hussein, was used as evidence he was a Muslim.

A key proponent of the ‘birther conspiracy’ was one Donald Trump. In 2011, for example, Trump opined:

“Why doesn’t he show his birth certificate? There’s something on that birth certificate that he doesn’t like.”¹

As late as 2012, more than a year after Obama had released his full, long-form birth certificate, Trump tweeted:



Obama would later poke fun at his critics. At the Al Smith Dinner in 2012, he noted that his opponent, Governor Romney, used his middle name, Mitt, as his first name. Obama then deadpanned: “I wish I could use my middle name.” In 2013, at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, he said: “I’m also hard at work for the plans for the Obama library. Some have suggested that we put it in my birth place but I would rather keep it in the United States.”

Illinois State Senator



In 1996 Obama won his first elective office as an Illinois state senator from the 13th District. This area covered the South Side of Chicago and the Hyde Park Area, which included the University of Chicago. Obama’s district was racially and economically diverse: it had some affluent areas but also some very poor areas.

¹ Obama later released his birth certificate, proving Trump wrong. At the time of writing, however, Mr Trump is yet to release his tax returns, with some commentators opining that this is perhaps because there is something in those that he does not like.

The seat had opened up because the previous state senator, Alice Palmer, had decided to run in a special election for the Congressional seat held by Rep. Mel Reynolds, who was being indicted for the sexual assault of underage campaign workers. Palmer, a well-liked and widely respected state senator, endorsed Obama's bid to replace her.



In late November 1995, when Palmer finished a distant third to Jesse Jackson, Jr. in the Democratic primary to replace Reynolds, she announced she would still not challenge Obama. However, by December 1996 she had changed her mind and said she would try and win re-election to the state senate.

To be a candidate for the state senate, you had to acquire 757 signatures supporting your candidacy. Obama easily achieved this. Palmer, however, announced her candidacy for the on the last possible day and had to hurry to get signatures. Although initially reluctant to do so, Obama's campaign filed a challenge to Palmer's signatures. After some investigation by the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners, it was found that many of Palmer's signatures were invalid. Palmer was forced to announce she was withdrawing her candidacy as she only had 561 valid signatures. Obama's challenge to Palmer showed he was prepared to play tough; although he was a newcomer he would



not be pushed around or told to 'wait his turn'.

During his time in Springfield, the Illinois State Capitol, he gained a reputation as someone who could bring Democrats and Republicans together to pass bipartisan legislation. In his bid for president in 2008, he would use this as evidence of his ability to be a unifying figure. However, many of his achievements only came once the Democrats took back control of both the Illinois House and Senate. His achievements included:



- Expanding access to healthcare and early years education for the poor
- Passing legislation that reduced racial profiling and meant police had to video tape interrogations

In 2000, Obama decided to run for Congress against incumbent Bobby Rush. This was arguably Obama's most significant political miscalculation. As Rush was an incumbent Democrat, Obama would have to beat him in a **primary race**. (An election to decide who gets to represent the Democratic/Republican party in the general election.) Had Obama beaten Rush, he would almost certainly have been elected to the US House of Representatives as the district (1st District of Illinois) was 65% African American.

Bobby Rush had been a founding member of the Black Panther movement in Chicago in 1968. Rush was heavily involved in seeking justice after the murder of Fred Hampton in Chicago in 1969 and was hugely popular in his district (1st District of Illinois). Rush had first been elected in 1992 and had been re-elected in 1994, 1996 and 1998.

Michelle Obama and most of his advisors told Obama not to enter the race but he ignored them. He later claimed that he was influenced to enter the race because polling had been conducted by some of his staff which appeared to that Rush had a few chinks in his armour. However, Obama's plan did not work out and in the Democratic primary election he lost, 60-

31. Rush went on in November of that year to be re-elected with 88% of the vote from the Illinois first.

After this defeat – the only electoral defeat Obama ever suffered – he considered giving up politics altogether and finding a way to help people through a different means.

David Remnick the editor of the New Yorker magazine and author of a book about Obama, explained to National Public Radio (NPR) what happened next:

It's funny. Obama, after losing that race, had a job interview for a foundation, and this foundation would have set him up rather nicely. He would have gotten a huge salary, and he would have had all kinds of money to give away to good works. And he went into the interview and his hands were shaking, and he came out of it and basically, the guy who was interviewing him said, of course you can have this job, but you don't want this job.

And Obama had to admit, no, of course, he didn't either. He had the addiction. He had the desire to be a politician. Even though he had been very suspicious of big-time politics when he was an organizer, he left organizing convinced, in fact, that he had to go into politics because that's where the real stuff happens.

Obama went back to the state senate and bided his time. He did not have to wait long.

Election to the US Senate, 2004

In 2003, Republican Senator Peter Fitzgerald announced he was leaving politics to return to private business. This left one of the two Illinois senate seats free for the 2004 election.

The context of the election is important. The USA was at war in both Afghanistan, following the 9/11 attacks, and Iraq, following information that alleged Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Consequently, a lot of focus was put on foreign policy issues. At the presidential level, Bush presented himself as a decisive leader against a weak, 'flip-flopping' John Kerry. Whilst Bush did eventually win re-election, he only did so by narrow margin (286 Electoral College votes to Kerry's 251), Bush's popularity – and Republican popularity generally - was nonetheless waning by 2004. In short, it presented an excellent opportunity for Obama.

Obama's primary opponents

Obama's election was, however, far from inevitable. He faced both a tough primary election and then a serious GOP contender in the general election.

In the Democratic primary election, Obama had two key candidates to worry about: **Dan Hynes** and **Blair Hull**.

Dan Hynes had a number of strengths:

- He was already state comptroller (a state-wide office) and so had excellent name recognition
- He was also a member of a well-known Chicago political family. His father, Tom Hynes, had been a state senator and later president of the Illinois state senate



Blair Hull was also a formidable opponent:

- He was a wealthy businessman with a fortune of between \$131 million and \$444 million. Money is very helpful in a campaign. In 2004 he spent between \$12 and \$28 million of his own money and established an early lead in the primary.
- In 2002 he had bankrolled a number of Democrat campaigns within Illinois and so had a number of connections throughout the state



How the race developed

When the Chicago media first started conducting serious polls in February (the primary election date was in March), they had Hull on 24% and Obama on 15%.

Then Hull's campaign imploded. It emerged that Hull had been previously arrested for battery, having threatened to kill his wife during an argument. (Although charges were never filed.)

By March, Obama comfortably led his nearest rivals by a 10% margin. On 16 March 2004, Obama won the Democratic Primary election with an overwhelming 53% of the vote. David Axelrod, a key Obama adviser, later said that when the numbers first started coming in on election night he thought they must be wrong because they were so good.

Obama wins the primary, speaks at the Democratic National Convention

In July 2004, Obama was invited by John Kerry's campaign to deliver a keynote address on prime time television. Although still only a state senator, as a youthful, powerful, black Democratic politician, he did not need to lobby that hard to be chosen by the campaign.

Obama would later say that the keynote speech 'came pretty easily' to him. It captured a lot of the themes that he had been working during his years in organising and in politics. In particular, at a time of deep division, his speech focused on unity and hope.

A key excerpt:

"We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America."

Obama finished with a hopeful message:

"The people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as president, and John Edwards will be sworn in as vice president. And this country will reclaim its promise. And out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come."

Obama's speech was greeted with enthusiasm. In the convention centre in Boston people ripped Obama posters off the walls, knowing they had seen something special.

The media were similarly impressed:

- Longtime political analyst, Jeff Greenfield, at the time with CNN, called it "one of the really great keynote speeches of the last quarter century"
- NBC's Andrea Mitchell called Obama "a rock star"
- Chris Matthews, a well-respected journalist on MSNBC, said: "We've just seen the first black president"

Perhaps the most telling reaction was from his supporter and aide, Kevin Lampe. Lampe had watched Obama evolve during his early years as a politician. When Obama first started speaking publicly, one reporter said he "almost sucked the life out the room". Lampe agreed, and said that a lot of hard work went into preparing Obama's 2004 Convention speech.



However, Lampe was happy with the end product. He said: "I walked on stage with my state senator from my neighbourhood, and I walked off stage with the next Democratic president of the United States."

Obama recharges for the general election in 2004

In the general election Obama was up against Republican Jack Ryan. Ryan was a formidable opponent:

- He had won a hard-fought Republican primary election with 36 per cent of the vote
- He was handsome and Harvard-educated
- He was married to a television star, Jeri Ryan
- Ryan had significant personal wealth as well as the backing of the Republican Party
- Support for Democrats and Republicans was about equal in Illinois: of the 19 Congressional districts, the Democrats held 10 and the Republicans held 9



Obama, however, had a number of advantages too:

- He had won 53% of the vote in the Democratic primary – this showed he had widespread support and gave him real momentum
- Perhaps more importantly, in the primary Obama had received over 650,000 votes, whereas Ryan had received less than 250,000. If Obama could turnout these voters again, he would have the edge.
- Democrats also dominated Chicago, by far the largest city in Illinois, and Republican support in the surrounding suburbs was weakening

Indeed, in May 2004, two polls were conducted statewide. The *Chicago Tribune* poll found Ryan trailing Obama 52% to 30% while the *Sun Times* reported that he was trailing Obama 48 percent to 40 percent in the U.S. Senate race, according to a Daily Southtown poll of 500 likely Illinois voters.

However, Ryan's campaign imploded in the summer of 2004. The *Chicago Tribune* sought to have his divorce records released. They were eventually successful and in June Judge Robert Schnieder ruled several of the files should be open to the public.

Some of the content was politically explosive: Jeri Ryan alleged that Jack Ryan had wanted her to perform sexual acts with him in public in sex clubs in New York, New Orleans and Paris. Jeri Ryan described one as "a bizarre club with cages, whips and other apparatus hanging from the ceiling."

On the day they were released, Jim Oberweis, one of Ryan's opponents in the Republican primary, commented that the allegations, if true, "would end [his] candidacy".

Less than a week after the files were released, Ryan ended his campaign.

The Hail Mary: Alan Keyes

With only months to go before the election, the GOP frantically looked around for a viable candidate who could challenge Obama. With only 86 days to go to the election, they ended up choosing Alan Keyes, a conservative African American commentator and a man who had twice failed to become a US Senator in Maryland.



The media met Keyes with negativity. The Washington Post called him a "carpetbagger".

Indeed, the *Post* was scathing in its criticism:

Republicans in the Land of Lincoln -- and this is the political party that preaches world without end that it is race-blind and wedded only to merit -- actively sought out African American candidates to run against Mr. Obama, also an African American. Cynical you say? Yes, and tokenism, too. But then they settled on erstwhile senatorial and presidential candidate and talk show host Alan Keyes of Montgomery County, Maryland. Illinois Republican machinations, once amusing, are now absurd.

It's clear by now that Mr. Keyes loves the limelight and to hear himself speak, notwithstanding his rejection by voters in two U.S. Senate races in Maryland and two runs for the GOP presidential nomination. So it comes as no surprise that he

would drop everything and hustle out to Illinois where he has never lived, to run for an office he can't win, and for a cause -- his own -- that deserves to lose. But that Mr. Keyes would allow himself to be drafted because of his skin color [sic] is beyond anything we would have expected, given his own long-standing vocal opposition to race-conscious decision making. Who out there believes for one second that the Illinois Republican Party would have reached halfway across the country for a candidate with Mr. Keyes's losing track record if the Democratic candidate were not African American?

In November, Obama comfortably beat Keyes, 70% to 27%. The 43% margin was the largest in the state's history for a US Senate race.

Obama's strengths to 2004

- **Oratory** - as the 2004 convention speech would demonstrate, Obama was a brilliant orator who could bring people together and give them a vision of what America could be
- **Unifying message in a time of division** – George Bush's presidency was a divisive one. Iraq especially began to split the country and during his second term Bush became almost historically unpopular. Obama's unifying message – leaning on the motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) – was well-suited to the moment
- **Ruthlessness** – Obama could be ruthless if he had to be. When he ran for the state Senate in 1996, Alice Palmer, a mentor of his, had originally vacated the seat to run for Congress. When she lost she wanted to re-enter the race for state Senate. Obama used an aggressive procedural move to force Palmer out the race. An NPR article called the race, 'The Political Execution of Alice Palmer'.
- **Organisation** – Although Obama got soundly beaten in 2000 against Bobby Rush, when he ran for the Senate two years later he had a team of people ready to support him. Moreover, in 2004 he managed to finally persuade David Axelrod to join his campaign. Axelrod would style himself as the 'keeper of Obama's message' and would stay with him all the way to the White House in 2009.
- **Luck** – It is undeniable Obama got lucky: both Blair Hull in the primary and then Jack Ryan in the general election in 2004 were sorely wounded by damaging revelations from their marriages. He was also the right person at the right time for the 2004 DNC speech. A state senator delivering a keynote is unusual, but that speech launched his career into the stratosphere.
- **Money** – Obama proved to be an effective fundraiser. He was able to spend over \$14 million on the 2004 elections; Keyes spent just over \$2.5 million. According to a research paper by Gary Jacobson, it is among the largest in history, both in relative and absolute terms.

