Dartmouth Professor Sizes Up Presidential Candidates

**BY TONY LANE**
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**HANOVER** — For a presidential race boasting eight Democratic and 10 Republican candidates, a scorecard sure would be useful.

That's exactly what Dartmouth government professor Ron Shaiko thought, too. Shaiko, senior fellow and associate director of the Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences, organized a student focus group centered around the Sept. 26 Democratic debate on campus.

One of the group's objectives was to create a "scorecard" before the debate, delineating the characteristics that were most important to them and then grading the candidates along those parameters during the debate.

A week after the debate, Shaiko sat down with the Valley News to relay his findings and handicap this most unusual presidential contest (the first since 1928 without an incumbent president or vice president seeking his party's nomination). The following is an edited transcript of that conversation:

**Valley News:** So, after the presidential debate and focus-group feedback, what do Dartmouth students want out of a presidential candidate?

**Ron Shaiko:** We did the focus group two hours prior to the debate, and that's when we wrestled with what attributes you're really looking for. It was outside the context of any of the candidates, so we did it in a theoretical way.

Experience, leadership, charisma, honesty, character, a sense of political pragmatism or diplomacy that they don't find in the current president — a set of building blocks we could apply to the candidates after the fact.

And it was on those grounds that (Barack) Obama struggled (in the focus group).

Obama was held up as the most charismatic of the eight candidates, so their expectations were rather high of him at the outset. As a result, they were a bit more harsh on him after watching the debate.

They thought he was overly programmed, overly rehearsed with stock lines that even if the question didn't fit the answer, he was going to give it anyway. Of the 16 students (in the focus group) only two thought their evaluation of Obama went up after the debate.

**VN:** Do you see the students of 2007 being more active in the process than they were in 2003?

**RS:** I was here for the 2004 elections, and the difference here is it is a wide-open race. I think they're more engaged but also more bewildered by this. The fact that there are a number of undecided voters on campus as well as in New Hampshire, that's because there is no real anchor point. There isn't a sitting vice-president running. There's no incumbent running.

What's interesting is, on the undeclared, they're moving toward the
Democratic party this year, whereas in 2000 they went overwhelming to (John) McCain.

VN: What is the significance of the recent news about Hillary Clinton overtaking Barack Obama in fundraising during the third quarter of the year?

RS: I think it’s less significant in a state like New Hampshire, but ... electability did come up as a concept the students are interested in, although in a disdainful way. They said, “I hate to say that, but if the person’s not electable, I can’t vote for him or her.” That’s where Clinton gets over the hump.

The downside for her ... is I can’t recall a candidate for president with such high negatives. More than 40 percent of the American voting population would never vote for her, and some polls it creeps up to 44 to 46 percent. Doing the math, she has to capture over 80 percent of the 56 percent that actually like her. That’s a tall task.

I think the general election is really going to swing on turnout. That’s one of the advantages, not that there are a lot of advantages for the Republican party right now, but Hillary on the ticket will turn out Republican voters, just because they don’t like her so much.

VN: One of the surprises out of the focus-group feedback was the students didn’t really notice race or gender among the candidates. Do you think that either one of those issues will be more prevalent in the general election?

RS: They could, and I think that’s a generational thing. I think older voters will have a more difficult time voting for a woman.

That’s the most interesting thing I’ve seen in 20 years of teaching — how many kind of diversity questions have gone away. The gay-rights issue is the best example of that. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, something like 58 percent are in favor of gay rights. The 70-and-over crowd is 80 percent against gay rights. The older you get, the more likely you’re going to hold the old values. The notion of electing a woman is not something that either the men or women (of the focus group) said anything about as a disqualifying circumstance.

VN: What capabilities will the 2008 presidential election winner have shown in order to come out on top?

RS: The word for 2008 is change. Who’s going to be the change agent here? Even Mitt Romney, running as a Republican, says, “I’m the agent of change. I’m the new Republican party.” And you certainly hear it from the Democrats all the time.

That’s a harder sell for Hillary. She’s been in the game. She’s been the establishment. She has to overcome that, to say either, “I’m a different person,” or “That’s a benefit to me.”

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