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—Mark Twain

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Pub Alley Analysis

A String of Wet Sponges

Political Books in Election Years, As Seen through Publisher Alley®

Mark Twain once wrote, “If we would learn what the human race really is at bottom, we need only observe it in election times.”

And perhaps the rule Twain applies here to humanity at large applies equally well to the publishing world. So with apologies to Twain and the human race, let’s take a quick look at what Publisher Alley suggests to us about the behavior of book buyers and book sellers during election times.

The Presidential Election Season

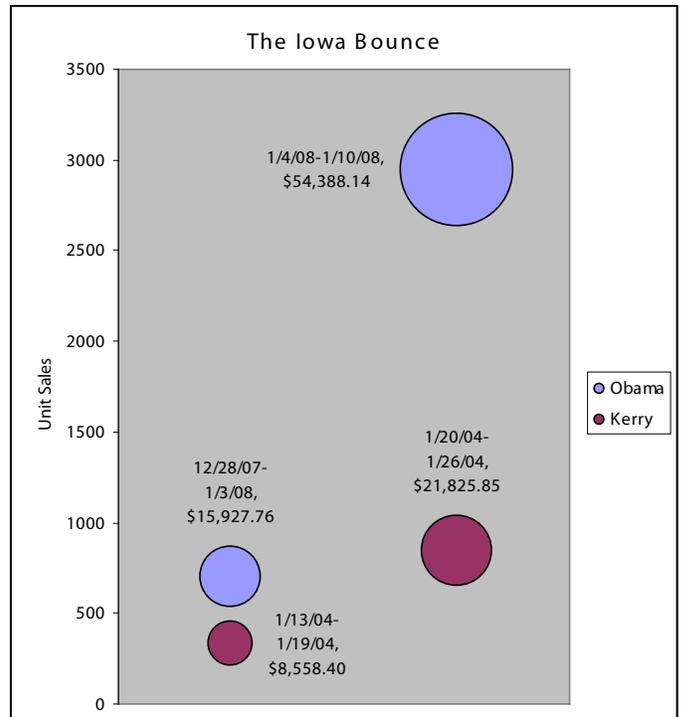
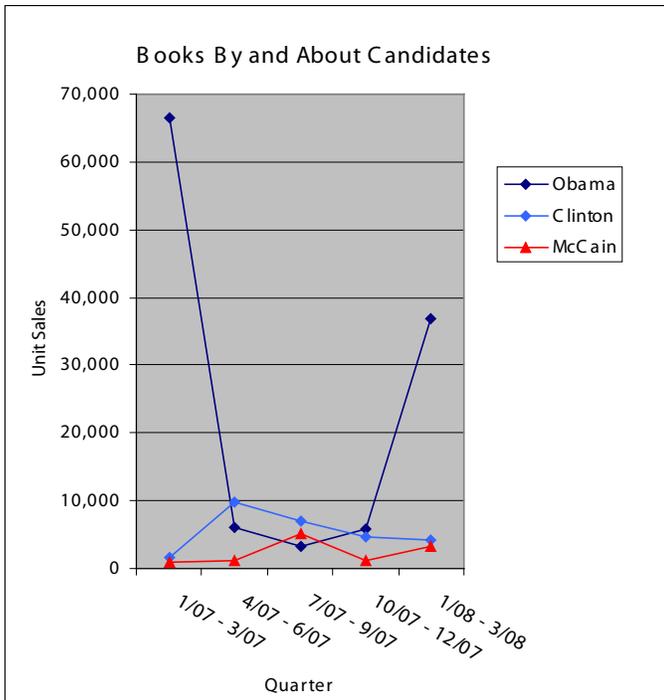
In the United States, leap years are election times par excellence, with our presidential elections always falling on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. The presidential election season starts early in the previous year and builds gradually through months of campaigning and canvassing; caucuses, primaries, and conventions; mendacious mailings and bitter ad wars; scurrilous charges and counter-charges; scandals and recriminations; crying jags and confessions—all leading to a frenzied final spasm of democracy in the fall.

Many election-related books, of course, appear during this cycle, and some existing books are made newly available. Sometimes the candidates even write books themselves, although in some cases one might need to take the word “write” figuratively here.

As of this writing, a series of Publisher Alley searches reveals a large number of titles by or about the three remaining major-party candidates. There are fifty titles by or about Barack Obama, eighty titles by or about John McCain, and 115 titles by or about Hillary Clinton. However, these totals include several instances of cloth, paper, and audio editions of the same title. So the number of truly distinct titles is substantially smaller.

How have these books performed since the first calendar quarter of 2007? A look at the following results shows that Obama titles held a very sizeable early lead back in the winter of 2007, mainly on the strength of his own book, *The Audacity of Hope*. He fell back to the pack during the spring, summer, and fall, and then surged out into the lead once again in the first three months of 2008.

Sales in April 2008 show Obama still holding a strong lead, with sales of 6,184 units, compared to 709 for Clinton and 690 for McCain. The strong showing for Obama titles probably isn’t very surprising. Obama is the newest face in the contest, while Clinton and McCain have been on the scene longer. So voters’ need for information on Obama is greater.



But it is interesting to note the timing of the demand for Obama titles, and how that timing relates to events in the race. Election watchers sometimes speak of the “Iowa Bounce.” The first electoral stop on the way to the nomination for each party is the Iowa caucus, which takes place in January. The Iowa caucus took place this year on January 3, and the winner of the Democratic race was Barack Obama. The caucus took place on January 13 in 2004, and the Democratic victor that year was John Kerry. A glance at the above chart suggests we look to see if the electoral bounce from Iowa carries over into book sales. And a search reveals that books related to these two candidates did indeed experience a sizable bounce in sales from the week before the caucus to the week after the caucus. In 2004, the bounce was a 254% increase in unit sales of Kerry-related titles, while Obama titles saw an even bouncier bounce of 420% in 2008.

Obama writes some of his own books, of course, and it is not entirely unusual for candidates to be authors. But danger abounds when politicians invade literary precincts, and they have not always been treated kindly by those critical souls who mainly write for a living, rather than seek votes. An example is this classic skewering of former president Warren Harding by H. L. Mencken. The Sage of Baltimore wrote of Harding:

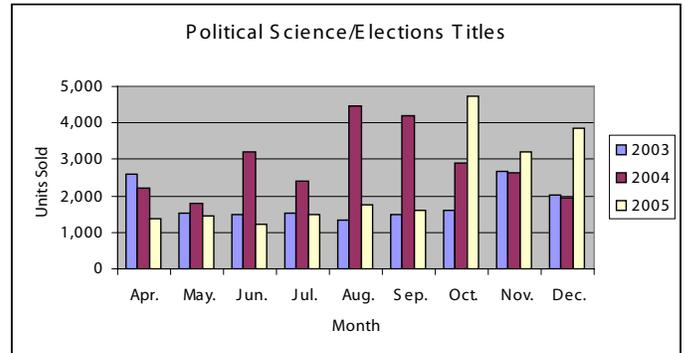
“He writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abysm of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacle of posh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash.”



Sadly for Harding, Mencken knew what he was talking about. Baker & Taylor (B&T) has sold close to eighty-six hundred copies of Mencken titles since 1999, while almost everything carrying Harding's name—and there isn't much—is sunk deep in the abyss of pish with zero sales. Still, a collection of Harding's addresses entitled *Our Common Country: Mutual Good Will in America*, published by University of Missouri Press in February 2003, sold seventy-six units lifetime, with well over half going to academic libraries.

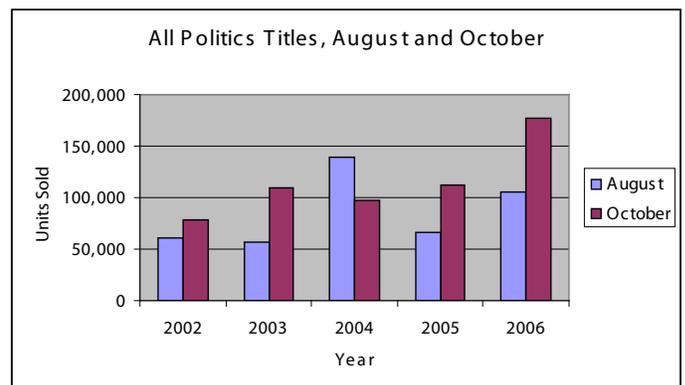
Comparing Election Years to Non-Election Years

It is a reasonable hypothesis that the intense interest generated by presidential elections might produce a surge in sales of political books in the months just prior to the election, especially in October. And, based on some preliminary analysis in Publisher Alley, there does appear to be an election-year surge in sales of political books. However, it is a bit surprising that the surge occurs mainly in the summer and in September, but not in October. An initial comparison of the election year 2004 with the non-election years 2003 and 2005 indicates the strongest boost occurs in August and September. Sales in October were strong, but not significantly different from the average of the non-election years of 2003 and 2005. The following chart looks at titles in one particularly relevant BISAC category—POL008000, Political Science: Political Process/Elections:



In generating these results, I removed one outlier that was skewing the results. That one, now-infamous title, *Unfit For Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry*, showed extremely strong B&T sales in 2004, selling over thirty-two thousand units, most of them in August and September. But even with that title removed, we see a pronounced election-year effect in June, July, August, and September for Political Process/Elections titles.

Let's broaden the analysis a bit, and take a look at all politics titles, not just those in one BISAC subcategory, but focusing on the months of August and October only. The results seem to confirm that election years drive interest in politics generally, but that once again, the increase comes in the late summer rather than October. In each of the years from 2002 to 2006, October sales exceeded August sales, except in the election year of 2004:





Running for office is not for everybody. The Roman patrician Gaius Marcius, as portrayed in the tragedy *Coriolanus* by Shakespeare, was so put off by the scheming of the tribunes and the need to beg votes of the plebian electorate that he withdrew from his own race for consul in a hail of curses:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek o' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air- I banish you.
And here remain with your uncertainty!
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts;
Your enemies, with nodding of their plumes,
Fan you into despair! Have the power still
To banish your defenders, till at length
Your ignorance—which finds not till it feels,

Making but reservation of yourselves
Still your own foes—deliver you
As most abated captives to some nation
That won you without blows! Despising
For you the city, thus I turn my back;
There is a world elsewhere.

Put in a modern idiom, Marcius lets the fickle people know they won't have Tricky Dick Coriolanus to kick around anymore.

So far, the remaining major candidates have avoided this kind of utter meltdown. But if one occurs, publishers will be quick to ink the deals and tell the story. Who can say what pinnacles of posh await to be attained in the summer 2008?

