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2008 Candidates Faking Authenticity?

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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Can you fake authenticity? Probably not, but it might be worth a try if you're running for president at a time when voters think leaders lack integrity.

Democrats cast themselves as courageous truth-tellers in their presidential debate Sunday night. Republicans debating Tuesday night might make the same claim. But if recent history is a guide, both fields will be bereft of authentic authenticity.

"There is an overarching lack of trust in anybody with power," said Democratic strategist Stephanie Cutter. "It's not just President Bush. It's Congress. It's our CEOs. It's Hollywood. It's Wall Street. There's just an overwhelming lack of trust with authority and the people who have it."

Any politician with a pollster knows that the public is particularly jaded toward Washington. From the Vietnam War, Watergate, Iran-contra and President Clinton's impeachment to runaway deficits, soaring health care costs and Hurricane Katrina, people have been fed a steady diet of scandal and misinformation from the federal government.

Americans are also better educated and thanks to the Internet better informed than ever, which helps them spot a phony. They want the real deal.

It will be interesting to see what this skeptical electorate thinks of former Sen. John Edwards, a Democrat who has apologized for his 2002 vote to authorize the war in Iraq and now wears his mea culpa as a badge of honor.

"He was right," Edwards said Sunday night, pointing to Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois who opposed the war from the start. "And I was wrong."

Edwards is breaking an unwritten rule in Washington to never to acknowledge misjudgment, one that Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton treats as gospel. He hopes to make her pay for refusing to apologize for her vote on Iraq.

"I think it is important for anybody who seeks to be the next president of the United States, given the dishonesty that we've been faced with over the last several years, to be honest (with) the country," the former North Carolina senator said.

Edwards was referring to Bush, whose credibility crumbled in the eyes of most voters after his 2004 re-election.

Bush's two biggest problems: The war in Iraq, which began as a fruitless hunt for weapons of mass destruction, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which exposed a wide gap between administration rhetoric and reality. Earlier this year, just four in 10 Americans consider the president honest and ethical, down from 63 percent in July 2001, according to ABC News/Washington Post polling.

In no small measure, Bush has helped usher in the era of authenticity.

"I think we're living in a post-Bush world where authenticity is going to rule the day," said Republican strategist Scott Reed, who ran Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign. "Everybody has had it with the whistling, don't-worry-be-happy song and is looking for some real straight talk and some authenticity. Actions have consequences."

John McCain learned that lesson. Some of his own advisers say the Arizona senator damaged his straight-talking image by bending over backward to appease conservative interests groups that dominate the GOP nomination fight.

But he now hopes to get credit for supporting a compromise immigration bill that is unpopular with conservatives.

"Pandering for votes on this issue, while offering no solution to the problem, amounts to doing nothing," McCain said to loud applause during a pre-debate address Monday. "And doing nothing is silent amnesty."

One of his rivals, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, has refused to budge from his abortion rights views despite warnings that social conservatives could scuttle his bid.

Former Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee is plotting a GOP presidential bid, casting himself as a regular guy who tells it like it is.

"Thompson gets it," Reed said of the authenticity angle. "He's not in the middle of Washington and doesn't have all the congressional stink. He certainly doesn't have the Bush smell. He comes across as a fresh face."

McCain acknowledges that most Americans disagree with his support for Bush on the Iraq war, but he likes to say, "I'd would rather lose an election than lose a war."

Democratic candidate Joe Biden seemed to channel McCain when he explained his vote in favor of extending congressional payment for the war, an unpopular stand among fervent Democrats. "Some things," the Delaware senator said Sunday, "are worth losing elections over."

Biden's rivals would say they agree with that high-minded sentiment. But three of them Edwards, Clinton and Sen. Chris Dodd of Connecticut voted to give Bush the OK to invade Iraq when it was politically expedient to do so, and now they are trying to distance themselves from the unpopular war.

Were they authentic then, or now or possibly both? Count on voters to weigh that question in 2008.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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