

# Presidents U.S.

**VOX POPULI:** An Ojai-Based Presidential Photographer Sets Out on the Campaign Trail to Capture Democracy's Essence



Story & Photos by Joe Sohm

*“I pray Heaven to bestow the best blessings on this house and all that shall hereafter inhabit. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.”*  
— JOHN ADAMS



**SHOW & TELL BUSINESS:** Katy Perry performs in a ballot dress; above, then U.S. Senator Barack Obama drives a bumper car while seeking votes in the 2008 Iowa Primary.

**V**OTING is the ultimate democratic act. It makes us uniquely American. Each Election Day, “We the People” become actors in this great Drama of Democracy.

In bad weather and good, we stream out of our homes, workplaces, stores and schools and journey into the voting booth. Behind closed curtains, yet en masse, 120-130 million of us vote. Whether rich or poor, black, white, brown, millennial or boomer, we demonstrate our freedom when we vote. We enter the voting booth as citizens, but emerge as a nation.

When the Democratic National Committee asked me to photograph the Clinton-Gore 92 Campaign and, months later, the Horatio Alger Association asked me to photograph President Reagan, I’ve not missed photographing a presidential campaign since. While annual elections offer each of us a chance to vote for governors, congressmen, mayors, judges and school board officials, it is only presidential elections that weave the world’s most diverse country into a national fabric. In a nation without monarchy, presidential elections are our ritual where we come together, across a continent, and choose one person to represent US, the United States. The Vox Populi has spoken.

If the body politic can be likened to a living, breathing body, voting is our lifeblood. Our political body is comprised of 320 million citizen cells, and each election renews those cells. If blood cells regenerate every seven years, America’s body politic rejuvenates itself in four-year cycles culminating on a first Tuesday in November. That is, unless that Tuesday falls on the first of the month, like in 2016, when the general election will be held on the second Tuesday. Considering our quadrennial

presidential elections occur during leap years, it’s as if the founders gave us an extra day to participate in our democratic experiment.

**B**eing President is about words. Campaigning for President is about pictures. I’ll never forget photographing Senator Obama driving a bumper car at the Iowa State Fair and his likening that bumper car ride to his up-and-down campaign! Or when Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Hillary Clinton inserted themselves into a stranger’s wedding picture.

Campaigns are political theater, comprised of endless photo-ops stretching across the 50 states. Draped in flags, each stage is set with lighting towers, camera platforms and sound resulting in irresistible cover-shots, news inserts and political eye-candy. Part concert, part circus, today’s rallies even include ‘A’ singers like Katie Perry dressed as a ballot, autograph rope lines, candidate-selfies, extras with pre-printed posters and plenty of banners, all designed to sell the candidate’s brand and slogan:

- “NEW AMERICAN CENTURY” MARCO RUBIO
- “HEAL. INSPIRE. REVIVE.” BEN CARSON
- “REIGNITING THE PROMISE OF AMERICA.” TED CRUZ
- “A POLITICAL REVOLUTION IS COMING.” BERNIE SANDERS
- “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN.” DONALD TRUMP
- “EVERYDAY AMERICANS NEED A CHAMPION.
- I WANT TO BE THAT CHAMPION.” HILLARY CLINTON

Prior to photography, Americans rarely saw what their president looked like. Their vote was based upon lengthy newspaper articles. This began to change in 1843 when former



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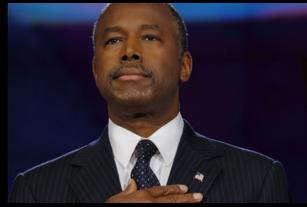
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VISIONS OF AMERICA





**LEADERS BOARD:** Republican Party hopefuls line up at the presidential debate held Sept. 17th nearby Simi at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. From left, Rick Santorum, George Pataki, Rand Paul, Mike Huckabee, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Dr. Ben Carson, Donald Trump, Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, Carly Fiorina, John Kasich and Chris Christie. **BELOW:** A selection of photos from the campaign trail.





US AND DEMS: Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton and former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley share a stage before a recent debate.



President John Quincy Adams appeared in the first Presidential photograph. In 1860 when Mathew Brady's photograph of candidate Abraham Lincoln appeared on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine, Lincoln later said: "Brady ... made me president."

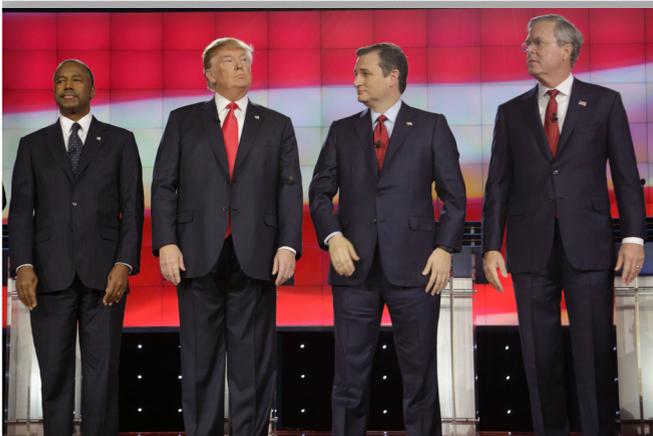
If one and a half centuries ago Lincoln realized a photograph is worth a thousand votes, then Donald Trump understood that whoever gets the most television coverage has his path to victory. So, as America's 58<sup>th</sup> Presidential Race heats up, it was time to pack-up my cameras and hit the road in search for our 45<sup>th</sup>

President. But with a historic number of candidates in the hunt, where do I begin? By the time OQ is published, surely everything will change. That's the nature of our politics and that's what keeps me photographing America's never-ending story. If Presidents 'R' US, my only hope is to catch a snapshot of who they were at that fleeting moment in time.

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RALLYING POINTS: Clockwise from above left: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump make pointed remarks. Clinton and Bernie Sanders share a pre-debate moment. Large crowds, both for and against, attend a Trump event aboard the U.S. Iowa in San Pedro. Dr. Ben Carson, left, shares the stage with Trump, Ted Cruz and Jeb Bush.



“There is nothing I dread so much as a division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader and converting measures in opposition to each other.”  
— JOHN ADAMS





DEMOCRACY'S TRAIL: Media and crowds abound as the campaign season heats up. All leading to (bottom row) the election Nov. 8, and the inauguration Jan. 20, 2017.

