

Who will survive?

With brutal character eliminations, humiliating challenges and 24-7 TV coverage, the presidential race has become America's most obsessively watched reality show.

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In January, Hillary Clinton appeared on *The Tyra Banks Show*.

On the daytime talk show's bright set, she and the host chatted about the importance of voting, her healthcare policy, her headbands and, of course, her marriage.

Then Tyra asked the candidate: If you could be in a reality show, which one would it be?

Clinton paused for a moment, laughing. And no wonder. How is she supposed to answer that?

She's starring in one already.

This year's presidential race has become the newest reality TV hit. It's not just a show — it's a pop-culture phenomenon, generating so much interest and passion and intense discussion, you'd think it was the next season of *American Idol*.

And as this year's political horse race continues, we know we can look forward to more plot twists, character eliminations and shocking revelations before it ends.

While regularly scheduled sitcoms and dramas were held up by a writers strike, the presidential primaries, and the hoopla of the campaign, have given us better television than we could have hoped for. And in November, when it's all over — when the last speech has been made, the last bit of confetti swept from the floor — this just might be the question on our minds: Will the 2008 presidential election be released on DVD?

Fans or voters?

In many ways, we were prepared for this election by reality TV. Just like those water-cooler buzz shows — *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *The Amazing Race* — it's a contest we follow in an involved, emotional way. We analyze the candidates' performance, remarks, wardrobes. We get defensive when someone sneers at our favorite, but we pick apart the competition. We examine the strategy behind each move, deciding what we might have done in their shoes.

And just when the campaigns seem to hit an even keel, here comes a leaked photo, a peeked-at passport, an alleged affair to shake us all up. As with reality shows, we hold our breath for the next Oh-no-you-didn't! moment. And we never have to wait long.

We even talk about the candidates as if they're reality-TV stock characters.

Clinton is the beloved victim of a media-rigged game — or she's the evil, plotting character viewers love to hate. (*Will she stop at nothing to win? Find out next week!*)

Barack Obama is the smooth fan favorite who can do no wrong — or he's the one who made it to the final rounds without having to prove himself. (*Will he self-destruct? Tune in to Thursday's debate!*)

And John McCain, now that he's sewn up the Republican nomination, is the sneak-up contestant — so low-drama, he just might win before anyone really takes him on. (*Can McCain maintain his immunity to the final round?*)

With characters like these — passionately liked or disliked, intensely interesting to watch — who *wouldn't* tune in? It's dramatic, and it's shown on every channel, at all times of the day. Besides that, it's guilt-free, because who can fault us for following an election?

Blurring the line

So why now, in 2008, is the election suddenly reality TV?

Several factors:

The election taps into something even *Friends* notably didn't do: It features a diverse cast of characters — in age, race and gender — which means more viewers (um, voters) see themselves reflected in the candidates.

It has all the ingredients for an exciting contest: A field with no incumbents, a high-stakes contest for a high-stakes job, one with real problems to solve, not Trumped-up challenges.

And it's easy to follow: It's on all the time, and when you're not near a TV you can find updates on the Web through blogs, news outlets, Twitter, Facebook, you name it. Fans can easily feed their obsession, which only cultivates more obsession.

Besides that, the election has invaded our entertainment. No wonder we've confused the two.

Even if you didn't follow politics, you wouldn't be able to avoid it. We have Oprah endorsing a candidate. We have Tina Fey endorsing another on *Saturday Night Live*.

We had Stephen Colbert and Conan O'Brien both claiming they "made Mike Huckabee." And Chuck Norris, who actually did.

And we have the candidates themselves popping up on TV, on more than just the wonky morning shows. Obama danced this month for Ellen Degeneres. McCain has made a second home on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. And just before the March 4 primaries, Hillary Clinton hit the late-night circuit — *Letterman*, *The Daily Show*, *SNL* — for a quick boost in the ratings, or, rather, the vote count.

We've been headed toward this moment since MTV's *The Real World* appeared in 1992. As more TV shows turn real life into a game, we've started doing the same thing.

Reality contests trained us to get deeply involved in the lives of strangers who look a lot like us. They taught us to award points for cattiness and fighting, to relish the moments of humiliation. And in a way, reality TV encouraged us to focus on the potential for rivalry and discord, to blow up minor differences and see them as insurmountable. We have learned to enjoy wringing our hands over utterly banal conflict.

What did *The Real World* and *Big Brother*, *The Apprentice* and *Survivor* do, after all, but thrust a mix of people into the spotlight together, add some pressure, then let them fight over the small stuff while the cameras rolled? Hello, campaign trail.

Beginning in 2000, *Survivor* taught us how to follow a group of arguing strangers day by day, then sit around talking about which cast members should be voted off the island.

Dancing With the Stars showed us that people can build careers, even become famous, on the things they do with ease — but you see more truth when you make them display their weaknesses.

Project Runway taught us to appreciate a fresh vision, even if we're not quite sure we'd want to wear it. (It also taught us to judge ruthlessly even when a well-intended effort goes awry.)

And reality's top dog, *American Idol*, taught us to listen for the voice crack, to enjoy the pain of watching the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time performance. It also trained us to sit through endless renditions of songs we know.

No wonder we were ready for this election.

The contestant candidate

There's another side to this. Reality programming has prepared us to engage with those faces on TV in a different way. It has helped us feel as though we have control over what happens. (After all, millions of votes roll in for *American Idol* contestants every time the phone lines open.)

It has helped us learn to let go and embrace new favorites when the contestants we love are eliminated.

And it has given us an appreciation for the unscripted moment, for the unexpected display of

emotion or vulnerability. We like these candidates more when they seem to be themselves, the moments when they emerge from behind their advisers and speechwriters and abandon the scenes that they've rehearsed. We sometimes tune out their prepared remarks and, instead, seek out the moments of humanity — Clinton's near-tears moment in New Hampshire, Obama's defense of his controversial pastor. Those moments are far more revealing — the difference between the saccharine *Eight Is Enough* and TLC's reality show *Jon & Kate Plus 8*.

In fact, the same impulse that made reality programming a prime-time staple is at work in politics.

The Tyra Banks question would never have been asked in a pre-"boxers or briefs" political culture. But remember 2004, when voters opted for the presidential candidate they'd rather sit down with for a beer? Today, presidential candidates have to pretend they are — as *Us Weekly* says — just like us! (In fact, both Democratic candidates have been featured in *Us Weekly* this spring, with spreads that made them seem fun, self-deprecating and altogether human. Just like us.)

They are, of course, *not* just like us. Tyra's implication that Hillary Clinton, or any other presidential contender, sits around watching *American Idol* is innately hilarious. These candidates can run for president because they don't spend two nights a week watching amateur singers butcher overplayed pop songs.

But American voters do. And, just as we want the faces on TV to look just like us, we are now choosing our presidents the same way.

Tuned in to the process

But here's something interesting: At the same time we're making the candidates more like us, the race is making us more like them. We are suddenly involved in the democratic process.

We used to sit with friends and talk about Simon and Paula. And OK, we still do. But now we also talk delegate counts and voter turnout. We've learned about superdelegates and about the two-step primary-caucus system in Texas. We know a little about the Democratic National Committee bylaws.

And, as the candidates move from state to state, we're all learning more about each other. We know about what drives the economy in Ohio; we understand the demographics of California. Suddenly, Keith Olbermann and Anderson Cooper aren't the only ones asking, "What's the demographic breakdown of suburban Philadelphia?"

Watching this race, we have become a nation of wonks. Or, at least, we're getting there. If we're not too distracted, in the end, by our analysis of lapel pins, dancing skills and lemon-yellow jackets.

Perhaps, by November, we'll see this as a battle for the future of our children, for healthcare and jobs, and our country's relation to the rest of the world. Maybe we'll come to realize it's not about

Clinton's hairstyles or Obama's jump shot or McCain's comb-over. And maybe we'll vote passionately over policy, not pantsuits.

Maybe. But we'll still want the DVD set.

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Campaign 2008: the box set

The 2008 presidential race has started to resemble a lot of our favorite reality shows. If the election is released as a DVD set, here's what we're expecting to see:

Season One: *The Real World*

Before the race narrowed, it was a crazy jumble of candidates — and the perfect cast for MTV's reality experiment. Take an ex-mayor of New York City, a former first lady, a 71-year-old war hero, a guy from *Law & Order*, a bass-playing former pastor and a Mormon with five sons. Now put them all together and see what happens. Ratings gold.

Season Two: *The Apprentice*

It's a contest played out in front of the nation. We the voters are Donald Trump, calling the candidates into the boardroom and firing them, one by one.

Mike Huckabee: fired in March. John Edwards: fired in January. Bill Richardson: fired in January. Mitt Romney: fired just in time for February sweeps. One by one, the candidates left the national boardroom while we all analyzed what went wrong. Rudy Giuliani's one-state strategy was bad. Romney had CEO experience but he couldn't connect. Could Edwards or Richardson be brought back as a VP candidate at the end of the season? Stay tuned.

Season Three: *The Amazing Race*

The candidates have traveled many miles on their mad journey — from the early primaries through Super Tuesday, to the March 4 primaries in Ohio and Texas, and on to Wyoming and Pennsylvania. They touched down in small towns and large cities, sometimes visiting more than one state in a day, hitting rallies and town hall meetings at all hours. Reporters followed. We watched video from the campaign trail. Who's looking tired? Whose progress is bogged down by stress and arguments? Most important, who will get there first — and with the most votes on primary day?

Season Four: *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?*

The ultimate pop quiz — international relations edition.

There's Hillary Clinton, answering Tim Russert's question about Russian President-elect Dmitry Medvedev: "Do you know his name?" "Med-, Medvedova ...whatever."

There's Barack Obama, calling the Canadian prime minister "the president of Canada."

And there's John McCain, mixing up his Sunni and Shiite by saying that Iran is supporting al Qaeda.

The question: Stay in school, or drop out?

Season Five: *Deal or No Deal*

This may be the most intense season yet for the Democratic candidates. Will delegates from Michigan and Florida be seated? Will Clinton and Obama take the next deal that's offered? Will the Democrats gamble too long and blow their chance to take the ultimate prize — the general election?

In November, it'll be a similar struggle. Will voters settle for the known or take a risk on the unknown? And — just as contestants always do — we'll forever wonder: If we'd chosen someone else, what might have been different?

— Alyson Ward