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Change and the 2008 American Presidential Election

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Summary

The political landscape of the United States of America experienced a momentous historical shift on November 4, 2008 when American citizens elected their first black leader to the land's highest office. This was no small feat for a country whose racial history is tarnished by the practice of slavery. Though President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in 1865, blacks have long lagged behind whites in virtually every socio-economic category. Despite this, a mere 133 years after the ratification of the 13th Amendment, Barack Obama, an American of African (Kenyan) and Caucasian descent, was elected the 44th President of the United States of America. Though many reasons account for Obama's unprecedented win in November, one common thread ties each together: the spirit of change. This essay will analyze how this one simple word, read on millions of political placards and exhausted by cable news networks, was not merely a political catchphrase to excite a hungry political base. In fact, the real "change" that facilitated Obama's election was in electoral demographics and voter turnout, among generational divides, in international geo-political paradigms, and in the nature of the winning candidate himself. Taken together, these factors demonstrate that "change" was not only an appropriate message to galvanize support, but more importantly the key mechanism that allowed Obama and the Democratic Party to triumph over the Republican nominee, Senator John McCain.

Key words: racial politics, immigration, Barrack Obama, electoral demographics, American presidential elections

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Change through a More Racially-Cum-Ethnically Diverse American Electorate

One of the most dramatic transformations in the 2008 American presidential election occurred in the racial and ethnic composition of voters. Like most significant changes, this demographic shift did not occur overnight. Rather, it was the result of a gradual four decade revision of American immigration policy, whereby national immigration quotas giving preference to affluent whites were abandoned in favor of policies that allowed more immigration from non-European countries. Prior to the 1960s, immigrants to the United States came primarily from Europe. Over the course of forty years, immigration policies began to equalize opportunities, allowing for a post-1965 complexion dominated by migrants from Latin America and Asia (Alex-Assensoh and Hanks, 2000). In addition, since the late 1970s, a significant number of immigrants have derived from Africa and the Middle East. In fact, since 1965, nearly 80% of foreign-born people in America have come from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa or the Middle East.

Emerging shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of immigrants (especially for those that become naturalized citizens and have the right to register and vote in elections) has allowed racial minorities to exert significant political influence in a variety of ways. First, most of the initial immigrant influx was concentrated in states (or regions) that have long been pivotal in American presidential elections. Further, immigrants are now beginning to settle in places without significant foreign-born populations, creating new communities and uprooting traditional electorate trends (Alex-Assensoh and Hanks, 2000). In effect, immigrants are not only in a position to enhance the existing political clout of racial minorities, but also they have the potential to influence the course of American politics in communities where the voice of racial and ethnic minorities were once limited. Second, as the numbers of Latino, Asian and African immigrants increased, organizations emerged to meet their social and economic needs. Many of these institutions have increasingly focused on expanding the political involvement of immigrants.

Though various segments of immigrant and racial minority communities have long participated in American elections, voter turnout has in general been below expectations and episodic in nature. An important change during the 2008 national elections, largely facilitated by the Obama team, was the mobilization of immigrant and racial-minority communities through voter registration drives, house-to-house meetings, the use of internet-based tech-

nology and, above all, the convergence of existing social networks as a point of entrée to the communities.

Sweeping changes in American electoral demographics played an important role for both the Obama campaign and the results of the 2008 elections. Researchers from Project Vote, a U.S.-based non-profit research organization, reported, *inter alia*: “The overall message is total ballots cast by white Americans was down, while African-Americans and Latinos cast substantially more ballots than they did in 2004. Nationally, 3.35 million more people voted for president in 2008 than four years ago” (Rosenfeld, 2008). In terms of the specifics, Project Vote also reported that 1.18 million fewer whites voted in the 2008 general elections than they did in 2004. In contrast, 2.88 million more African-Americans, 1.52 million more Latinos, 67,000 more Asian-Americans and 1.32 million members of other minorities voted in the 2008 compared to the elections held four years prior. The sum total is 1.18 million fewer white voters and 6.96 million more minority voters (Rosenfeld, 2008). Change, as a factor in the 2008 election, not only emanated from those who turned out to vote but also from those who stayed home on Election Day. Moreover, these first-time voters overwhelmingly supported Obama. Interestingly, however, change was not only found in terms of skin color or surname derivations. The age of voters reflected another significant demographic shift.

Change through the Generations

In commenting on then-Senator Obama’s political success with the younger generation, Donna Brazile, a former political campaign strategist for Vice-President Al Gore’s 2000 presidential campaign, offered the following anecdote: “Obama invited the young to become actively involved. He made them believe that they could make a difference, and he inspired them to do the impossible. Obama spoke to them as equals. They were invited into his campaign as partners who had an equal stake in the outcome. Perhaps, most importantly, Obama had the confidence in them to step back and put the youth in charge of organizing one another and to become the voice of change.” (Brazile, January 2009). This philosophy of empowerment generated unprecedented levels of support among young people (66%) and new voters (68%) for Obama in the 2008 elections (Schifferes, 2008).

The Age Gap among Whites

Until 2008, conventional wisdom dictated that those aged 18 to 24 could simply not be counted on to vote on Election Day, let alone make a significant difference in election outcomes. In fact, since the passage of the 26th

Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age in America from 21 to 18, examinations of election statistics indicate a steady decline in voter turnout among those aged 18 to 24 (www.populationconnection.org). Moreover, partisan affiliation among the young usually was divided evenly among the two parties, with a slight edge given to the Republicans. In the 2004, 2006 and 2008 general elections, however, the Pew Research Center reported that a large majority of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 not only supported the Democratic Party, but also have been the party's most supportive age group (Pew Research Center, 2008). Pew further noted that 66% of the youth vote was cast for Obama, while only 31% went to McCain. The gender and racial composition of this age group also demonstrates a shift in traditional voter patterns; 55% are women and over 30% are made up of racial minorities. For many political analysts, Obama's historic rise to the Presidency is another piece of evidence that suggests a shift in partisan identification among America's younger voters is afoot.

Age differences, however, were not only important in terms of the voter turnout rate and partisan affiliation. The age constitution was also salient in highlighting a growing generational gap among whites in the South. An analysis from the Institute of Southern Studies underscored the following: "In all but two southern states, white voters under-30 chose Obama in higher numbers than the average for white voters in the state" (<http://www.southernstudies.org>). The biggest generational gap occurred in North Carolina, where a majority (56%) of white voters under-30 chose Obama. In eleven other states, young voters gave an edge to Obama, though rarely as large as the margin found in North Carolina. Georgia and South Carolina, traditional havens of Republican support, were the lone southern states that showed a preference among young white voters for McCain. (<http://www.southernstudies.org>).

The Age Gap among African-Americans

Though 95% of African-Americans supported Obama over McCain, the campaign highlighted generational differences on the discourse of race in America. Scholars argue that the key divide exists between those born prior to, or during the Civil Rights Movement, who long ago adopted and forged a pointed racial political agenda, and younger generations of blacks who seek to "transcend" race by deliberately avoiding direct discussions of racial equity. Instead, this younger generation hopes to achieve racial equality through other universalistic means.

Overall, the Civil Rights Movement focused on black and racial minority rights as the mechanism for American salvation. It made gains by talking explicitly about race. The next generation of African-American politicians,

however, used a de-racialization strategy concocted to counter the backlash over Civil Rights and broaden their appeal to other voters by focusing on wider societal themes. In some quarters, African-American candidates were successful precisely because they represented the Booker T. Washington mentality of “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.” Yet the downside of this strategy often eschewed government involvement in certain aspects of the black community. The succeeding generation of African-American politicians that favored de-racialization strategies was also caught in a conundrum. Though they garnered more support across racial lines, they often severed ties to the old guard of African-American leadership. Moreover, these candidates were, in large measure, products of integrated or predominantly white environments. These complexities, which did not garner significant attention from the mainstream media, were very much evident in the 2008 elections. A key point of discourse, especially within African-American communities, focused on whether Obama is black enough and will his presence hurt rather than help black liberation causes.

Though this budding intra-racial conflict was tempered on Election Day, Obama’s overwhelming favorability among African-Americans does not suggest that debates on his usefulness to the “black agenda” have ceased to exist. Instead, expectations from the African-American community are unfairly high. Consequently, Obama is likely to receive as much praise as he does criticism from diverse African American constituencies as he exercises his presidential powers over the next four years.

Change in the Method of Campaigning

In addition to the above-mentioned electoral shifts, the employment of innovative internet-based technology combined with the coalescence of grassroots organizations provided Obama a wider-reaching network to disseminate his campaign message. The foundation of this campaign strategy was laid by former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, a medical doctor by profession, whose outsider bid for the presidency in 2004 failed, despite his success using the internet to raise money, galvanize support, and mobilize voters. On a much smaller scale, the Republicans were also effective in their use of technology to raise money during the 2000 and 2004 election campaigns. Unlike his predecessors, however, Obama’s strategy incorporated technology to target and mobilize different constituencies in ways that rose above partisanship and the call for money. Through technological mediums, including e-mail, text-messaging, and social networking, Obama not only kept in touch with his supporters, but also made them feel a part of the team. The highly anticipated selection of his running mate, Senator Joseph Biden, was first announced via a text-message to Obama supporters, hours before it was released publicly to the news media. Such intimate, ongoing connec-

tions between Obama and his supporters were enhanced by the use of technology in ways that had not been effectively done prior to 2008.

Post-election plans reveal that Obama is not merely a beneficiary of technology, but rather, he plans to utilize his position to enhance America's internet infrastructure. During the campaign, he spoke about the transformative power of the internet to improve American's quality of life. He argued that it could reduce health-care costs, create jobs, and make it easier for citizens to participate in government decision-making (December 17, 2008, Obama's Internet Agenda", International Herald Tribune Opinion, <http://www.ihf.com>).

Much of Obama's success in utilizing the internet was a result of his willingness to court a wide variety of existing organizational networks. Upon his nomination for President by the Democratic Party, Mr. Obama noted, "I was never the likeliest candidate for this office. We didn't start out with much money or many endorsements. Our campaign was not hatched in the halls of Washington—it began in the backyards of Des Moines and the living rooms of Concord and the front porches of Charleston." (*Ebony Magazine*, January 2009, p. 50; also "This Is Our Moment", President-Elect Barack Obama's Message on Election Night, pp. 50-52).

Though grassroots campaigning has a long history in American politics, Obama made several enhancements. Not only did his campaign seek to foster and develop a wide range of social and professional networks, it also delegated key responsibilities to local teams that would bolster his supporters voting experiences.¹ Throughout the country, attorneys volunteered alongside other citizens to watch what some reporters call, "the invisible election of 2008—the nuts and bolts of election administration that journalists rarely report and citizens rarely see" (Gerken, 2008).

In fact, contrary to what many journalists reported in their publications, Heather Gerken, an attorney in Obama's "boiler room," where electoral problems were reported from around the country, contends that many problems existed at polling stations, including the lack of machines that left thousands of people waiting as much as three hours to vote. Other polling stations indicated that there were enough machines but too few poll workers to direct voters to empty machines. In some jurisdictions, poll workers did not know the basic rules about provisional ballots and election protocols. Other polling places needed new pens after existing ones ran out of ink. Still others ran out of ballot papers. These problems existed despite expectations of a record voter turnout and the Obama campaign's pleas to vote early. Yet with-

¹ In my capacity as a licensed attorney, I was a member of Obama's Indiana election protection network, which enabled me to monitor a polling site to report problems with election procedures, voting machines, the treatment of voters and the implementation of election rules.

out the existing organizational networks in place to monitor the polls and Obama's encouragement to arrive early, his victory may not have been as decisive.

The Call for Change from Beyond American Shores

While Americans are ultimately responsible for electing their president, international opinion may have also played a role in nudging America toward Obama. Derrick Bell, a well-known New York University legal scholar, argues that the 1954 *Brown versus Board of Education* court decision was perhaps a result of international concerns about America's standing in the world. At the time, America was considered the standard bearer of freedom, yet justice and equality for its own citizens was not guaranteed (Bell, 2004). It is only natural, then to examine international opinion surrounding Obama's candidacy and ultimate victory, especially given the international community's overwhelmingly negative opinion of the sitting President, George W. Bush.

In fact, the last eight years often read like a litany of bad reviews, reflecting among other things, U.S. hostility to the Kyoto Protocol, alleged American violations of human rights protocols regarding its political detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the unreasonable restrictions on the use of American funding to stem the global tide of AIDS, and the unilateral activity that propelled the United States into war in Iraq. Taken together, these issues have increased anti-Americanism throughout the world. Evidence of these sentiments are apparent from an opinion survey conducted by major newspapers in eight countries, including the London-based newspaper, *The Guardian*; *Le Monde* in France; Canada's *La Presse*; and Mexico's *Reforma* (Glover, 2008) The findings showed that, based on international opinion, Obama would win by a large majority had he run in most of the countries sampled. This is perhaps largely due to the fact that over 70% of the populations in some of these countries argued that America is either worse or much worse since George W. Bush was elected President in 2000. After Obama's visit to Germany, a husband and wife opined that "after so much disappointment, people are ready for the politics of change" (Kulish, 2008).

Change Wrapped In Human Form: Obama as the Essence of Change

Perhaps the most important change of the 2008 American presidential campaign was the Democratic candidate himself. He defied nearly all of the general stereotypes and troupes about politicians and African-American men. Unlike previous generations of black politicians, for whom it was nec-

essary to emphasize racial disparity as a way of achieving electoral success, the current electorate seeks candidates who eschew politics of race. What they saw and received in Obama was not merely a candidate who shunned his racial past, but one who proved that it is possible to be black and American at the same time. Obama was able to convince large swaths of the African-American community who were skeptical that he was not black enough, as well as whites, who thought that he was too black. Obama instead was perceived as both African and American, without being held hostage by either designation.

In addition to Obama's ability to transcend the shackles of his skin color, he was able to frame what it meant to be an American in ways that were receptive to America's diverse racial, ethnic, religious, social and national affinities. To this end, Obama concentrated on themes of hope, bi-partisanship, and his innate ability to understand all races given his formative influences of black, white and Asian parentage. He stood firm and resisted the traditional approach of overt negativity and race baiting. Obama choose instead to constantly focus on hope, opportunity, enthusiasm, and promise that is deemed to be inherent in the American dream. In this respect, Obama embodied the essence of change in terms of racial politics, as well as a change in the negative tenor of American politics. His personal style and belief that all things are possible in America are the foundation his campaign's success.

Conclusion

Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, campaigned for the country's highest office on a platform of change that he would usher into American society. While this message and the content of his character were extremely important, there were several other gradual changes that had occurred within American demographics, culture, generational attitudes, and technology that came together on November 4, 2008 to facilitate his electoral victory. The election results are not only perceived as a victory for African-Americans, but for the entire world as the United States can once again claim to be the bastion of democracy, freedom and justice.

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