



The factors behind Barack Obama's election as President

A truly historic election took place in the United States on November 4, 2008: for the first time in the history of the country, a - partly - Afro-American politician was elected President. All but one of the previous forty-three presidents was WASP, that is, White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant male (John F. Kennedy was Catholic). Barack Obama's victory was almost a foregone conclusion, especially after the financial collapse in October. This year's presidential - and Congressional - elections heavily favored the Democrats and almost from the beginning of the election season, including the primary elections, majority opinion was held it is only the Democrats who can lose the election; the Republican candidate was forced to fight an uphill battle all the time.

There was hardly any factor that was working for the benefit of John McCain, who - true to his character - put up a good fight and salvaged as much as could be from a losing position. However, ultimately, he had to acknowledge his defeat. In a broader sense, the Republican Party, despite the serious setbacks on both fronts, might gain in the long run: serious thinking about the reinvention of the party can be started now instead of - say - 2012.

Analysis:

The deck was heavily stacked in favor of the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008. The circumstances created a most favorable atmosphere for Barack Obama: e.g., about 80 percent of the people wanted 'change' - whatever they meant under that term. The Obama-team cleverly identified this wish as the overarching theme during both the primary campaign against the mighty Clinton-machinery and the national campaign against John McCain.

The most important specific factors in Barack Obama's victory are as follows:

Philosophical. Some of the conservative ideas that enabled the Republicans to dominate presidential politics in the past forty years (they have won seven out of the ten presidential elections since 1968) have lost their attraction to large segments of society. Foremost among them is the neoliberal economic policy; an ever greater portion of the American electorate believes that supply-side economy with its tax cuts favoring the people in the upper income tax brackets is basically unfair and they want more equality in the distribution of wealth. The conservative idea of deregulation was also badly hurt by the collapse of a number of emblematic financial institutions.

Social. While both in 2000 and 2004 an approximately equal number of people identified themselves as either Democrat or Republican, now the former group enjoys a ten-point advantage over the latter. The change can be partly explained by demographic changes: racial minorities which are traditionally Democratic-leaning voters - Afro-Americans and Latinos in the first place - constitute now a larger electoral bloc than they did a few years ago. The Obama-team paid special attention to mobilizing the young, especially the first-time voters; the age group between 18-32 again historically is more prone to support the liberal Democratic candidates than the conservative Republicans.

A much higher percentage of the Democratic voters were enthusiastic about their own candidate than the Republican ones. It was especially the religious conservatives (born-again Christians, Christian Zionists, etc.) who were distinctly reserved about John McCain. The nomination of Gov. Sarah Palin as vice-presidential candidate did shore up some support among them but only at the price of alienating another key voting bloc, the independents, from the Republican ticket. In addition, the Republican strategists overestimated the potential attraction of Gov. Palin to the disillusioned Hillary Clinton supporters. They overlooked the fact that the two women politicians represented diametrically opposite models for women.

Policy issues. The questions most people were concerned about were traditionally the Democratic Party's strength. Throughout the election season almost two-thirds of the voters identified economy as the single most important issue, and the Democrats were viewed as more competent handling economy than the Re-

publicans. The traditionally strong Republican issues, foremost among them defense and national security, did not play after all such a prominent role among the concerns of the voters as some Republican strategists originally wanted to believe. Ironically, one of the few successes of the Bush Administration, namely, the prevention of another attack on the scale of those on September 11, 2001, may have played into the hands of the Democrats by removing this question from the limelight. Moreover, the Democrats have made inroads into the traditional Republican territory of 'values': the successful 2006 Congressional elections (engineered by Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Rahm Emanuel) justified the Democratic strategy of running socially conservative, e. g., pro-life candidates in such heavily Republican states as, among others, Mississippi.

Campaign strategies. The Obama-team was running almost a flawless campaign right from the beginning. They first outmaneuvered the Clintons, who were regarded to have assembled the most formidable political machine in the past few years, then they continued their carefully conceived and level-headed campaign against the Republicans as well; e. g., when John McCain at first announced the suspension of his campaign and flew to Washington, D.C. at the beginning of the financial collapse, Barack Obama practically sat out the storm and did not waste his political capital on an unpopular issue. The Obama-team was waging a 'war of attrition' against John McCain.

After changing his position of accepting federal funding and, therefore, a cap on campaign expenses, the Democratic candidate collected as much money as no one before him. It enabled him to wage a 50-state campaign (designed by his chief campaign manager, David Axelrod) and to compete in previously safe Republican states as well even if his chances were meager. This strategy forced John McCain spent some his precious resources in states on which he originally did not intend to waste any money. At the same time, the Republican campaign was anything but efficiently organized and smoothly run. The message, the strategy together with the personnel changed rather frequently and the inevitable infights in any campaign among the different advisers surfaced well before the election.

Personality contest. The American presidential elections have become (degenerated) into a sort of 'beauty contest' recently. The candidates' physical appearance and their 'personal narrative' are playing an ever increasing role in the eyes of the voters whose majority, about three-fifth, are not very familiar with the candidates' political programs. Barack Obama sold himself as a cross between Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy. He emphasized the validity of the 'American Dream' and the fact that with his election 'the torch' would be passing into the hands of a new, post-Vietnam generation. His core message was transcending party, racial, and other fault lines in the spirit of Dr. King. John McCain's personal story was centered around his being a lonely (maverick) American hero, who takes on bureaucracies, corrupt practices and who fights to a just cause till his last breath.

He also emphasized his ability to transcend party politics with a little more justification than Barack Obama. He actually has a track record of working together with Democrats, such as Edward Kennedy, Russell Feingold or Joseph Lieberman, while Sen. Obama's voting record, at least in 2007, was among the most partisan ones. Barack Obama talked about 'judgment', while John McCain about 'experience'. A number of people thought that Sen. McCain had a little too much of the latter. More voters expressed their concern about his age than about Sen. Obama's mixed racial background. Regarding the racial issue, the so-called (partly mythical) Bradley-effect did not play any significant role, primarily because those who had reservations about an Afro-American candidate would not have voted for a Democratic candidate anyway.

Communication and media. The Obama-team was operating a highly sophisticated electoral machine by utilizing the latest technology, foremost among other things invading the blogosphere. They created a vast network of field offices all over the country with an unprecedented number of volunteers and paid assistants. Because of the immensively deep war chest, the Democrats were able to reach practically everyone they wanted to and, thus, they beat the Republicans in one of the most important fields, that of mobilization. The Republican strategists were, on one hand, a little bit old-fashioned in concentrating almost exclusively on e-mail messages, phone-banks and robo-calls and, on the other one, they had much less disposable financial resources and less enthusiastic volunteers than their Democratic counterparts.

The tone of the campaigns, at times, was very shrill and neither party was above negative campaigning (mud-slinging), although the Republicans resorted to more personal attacks than the Democrats. The Democrats themselves, to a certain extent, can be blamed for it because they placed their presidential candidate's personality in the center of their campaign - given Barack Obama's thin resume this was almost a default position. Much of the mainstream media fell in love with Barack Obama early and were biased against both Hillary Clinton (their former favorite) and John McCain (also a former favorite). However, their impact on the voters might be limited: the great majority of the American voters do not read The New York Times or watch, for instance, the NBC's political shows.

The Bush-factor. One of the heaviest weights John McCain had to carry with himself was George W. Bush's eight-year long presidency. Pres. Bush had as low popularity rates as Richard M. Nixon 'enjoyed' during the Watergate scandal. The Bush Administration was seen by most of the people as arrogant and incompetent at the same time. Most of the people, with less justification than more, put all the blame on Pres. Bush for the recent economic troubles (some measures of the Clinton Administration also contributed to the irresponsible practices of certain financial institutions). A popular incumbent president can do a lot for the election of his own party's candidate: Ronald Reagan's popularity was a major factor in the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988. Reagan's popularity resulted in breaking a long pattern in American history: neither of the two major parties was able to hold on the presidency for more than two consecutive terms after 1945.

Conclusion:

Barack Obama is not in an enviable position. He has raised such high hopes both at home and abroad that it will be impossible to fulfill the expectations. Even during the campaign, there were two Barack Obama's concerning domestic politics: one liberal, on the left of the political spectrum, and one centrist. He won the primaries as Obama No. 1, and the presidential election as Obama No. 2. It will be impossible for him to satisfy both voting blocs at the same time. He is likely to try to govern from the center; the question is whether such committed liberal Congressional leaders as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, as well as such interest groups as the trade unions, will or will not push him toward the left.

The Democrats might fall into the trap of hubris: besides the White House, they are in majority in both Houses of Congress; moreover, Barack Obama will have the opportunity to nominate one or two liberal-minded U.S. Supreme Court judges. Thus, all three branches of the government will be controlled by the liberals. It would be a mistake for the Democratic Party to believe that it has received a mandate to push through a radical liberal agenda. As regards foreign affairs, Barack Obama has inherited a number of pressing issues from Iraq through Afghanistan and the emerging power centers to energy security. Once, his idol, John F. Kennedy collected 'the best and the brightest' around himself; and the U.S. plunged into an unwinnable war in Vietnam under their leadership and - at home - a conservative revival and backlash followed the large-scale social engineering at the end of the decade.