

THE CRESSSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

December 2008

Vol. LXXIII, No. 2

Election 2008 Roundtable

Chris W. Bonneau

Robert Benne

Jennifer Hora

On 4 November 2008, Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth President of the United States. Senator Obama's convincing win marked both the end of the longest presidential election campaign in American history and, perhaps, the beginning of a new era in American politics. On election night, the scene was one of jubilation in Chicago's Grant Park where well over 100,000 Obama supporters celebrated his victory. Senator McCain's supporters were more subdued, but even the most steadfast conservatives could recognize the importance of the election of the first African American president. Inspired by this unlikely president and concerned about the considerable challenges he faces, Americans are looking to the future with both hope and concern. At this important moment in the nation's history, three scholars of American elections and public life offer their reflections on the meaning of this election and about what might happen next.

2008: A Transformative Election

Chris W. Bonneau

AS I THINK THOSE WHO HAVE FOLLOWED POLITICS for a long time know, there was something *different* about this election. Sure, it was the first time in a long time that no Clinton or Bush was on the ballot. Yes, the president's approval ratings were hovering in the 25% range. But there was something else. Something that was not there in 2000 or 2004. A buzz. A sense of excitement. A sense of something historic.

I am writing this on the afternoon of Election Day as I watch thousands of people waiting hours to vote, and the thought that keeps going through my head over and over is that this is a transformative election. Certainly, at least, the voters are treating it as such. And the ability to tap into that transformative dimension is what separated the campaigns of John McCain and Barack Obama. One only has to look at the "ground game" of the candidates (documented excellently at www.fivethirtyeight.com). Obama's campaign had more volunteers than McCain, more field offices than McCain, more resources than McCain, more enthusiasm than McCain. In all aspects of the grassroots, get-out-the-vote effort, Obama was able to mobilize more people than McCain. Commentators described the Obama organization as the best-run organization they ever had seen.

This was the fundamental difference in the two campaigns. While Obama talked about hope and change and provided a positive vision for the future, McCain gave us Joe the Plumber (who was not even a plumber), lectures about earmarks, and a vice-presidential nominee who a majority of Americans felt was not qualified for the job. It is not that McCain was a bad nominee: it is that he was the *wrong* nominee. Hillary Clinton fell victim to the same force in the primary: it was not that she

THE CRESSET

was a bad candidate; it was that her message of experience and focus on specific policies was the *wrong* message for 2008.

So, what was this something “different”? If we believe the polls and the voters, it was a sense that we have lost our way as a country. A sense that something was fundamentally wrong with the way we have been conducting ourselves. This is much different than other recent elections. In 2000, people were largely satisfied with the direction of the country. Even though the incumbent party did not win the White House, it was not a “change” election (in fact Al Gore even received more votes than George W. Bush). In 2004, again, there was some discontent, but Bush’s approval ratings were still pretty strong. Now certainly there have been other “transformative” elections. My point is not that 2008 was unique. Rather, my point is simply that it is unlike any election many (most?) of us ever have experienced. In no recent election have so many people questioned our government on so many levels—the economy, foreign policy, ethics, etc. The best parallel might be 1980—when an outsider with some experience who was charismatic and talked about hope won the White House.

Into this environment of uncertainty and unease with the status quo came a candidate who is himself transformative, a candidate who does not look like the typical candidate, a candidate who has not spent his entire life in government, a candidate who inspires us simply by the fact that *he* is the one running for president. This year, this time, was crying out for a candidate like Barack Obama. A candidate who represented change: change from the economic policies that helped contribute to the current economic downturn/recession; change from the failed foreign policy that led us to invade and take over a country that posed no threat to us; change from the typical negative campaign and mudslinging that asks us to be motivated by fear, not hope. Change from the status quo, in all its forms. The transformative candidate transformed the electorate and transformed the way to campaign in this transformative election.

Now, none of this readily or easily translates into governing. Obama’s administration will have to make hard choices about how to prioritize his policy proposals. But if he governs in the same way he ran his campaign, he may usher in a new way of governing as well. Obviously, the challenges Obama will face are many. But it feels like, for the first time in a *long* time, they are not overwhelming, not insurmountable. It feels like the transformative candidate who ran on the slogan of “Yes we can!” will be able successfully to change that to “Yes we will.”

Finally, this reflection would be incomplete if I did not mention the fact that we have now elected our first African-American president. Fifty years after black children and white children were allowed to attend school together, we have elected a black president. In an election in which a 109-year old woman whose father was born into slavery cast a ballot, we have elected a black president. At a time where the country seemed (hopelessly?) divided, we have elected a black president. A president who bridged the gap between red states and blue states. A president who inspired all people—young and old, black and white, men and women, rich and poor—to participate in the democratic process. A president who appealed to our best parts. A president who has helped give life to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and who has moved us along the path to achieving a “more perfect union.”

A transformative election, indeed. †



Photo by Marc Nozell. (Creative Commons, 2.0)

Hopes and Fears for a New Presidency

Robert Benne

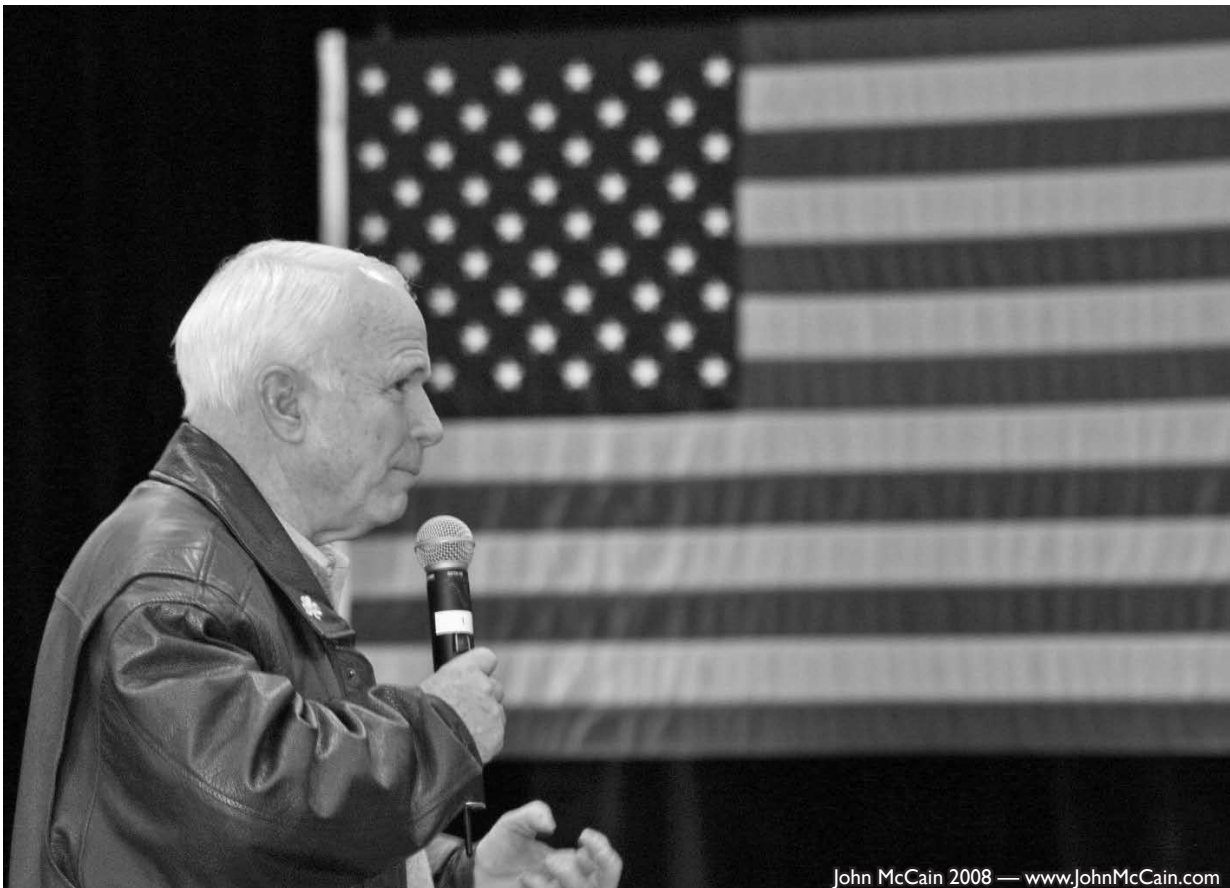
IT WAS CLEAR THAT FROM MID-SEPTEMBER ON, there was little or no chance for John McCain to win the Presidency. The economic melt-down determined that the party out of power would carry the day. Whether deserved or not, the party in power is held by American voters to be responsible for the economic conditions in which they find themselves. As I see it, a noble and deserving man—McCain—was caught in inexorable events over which he had little control. Without the meltdown, he would have won handily. The late addition of a populist dash of color and energy—Sarah Palin—had little effect. Though both were berated for the campaign that they ran, there was in truth little that they could do.

Given this outcome, what is there to hope for and fear? First, it is important to register satisfaction over the success of an African-American man who rose from modest origins to the Presidency. He has embodied the American Dream once again. Moreover, he exhibited talent, grace, and genuine humanity in his campaign. So congratulations are in order.

There are signs of hope in Obama's successful run for the Presidency. He ran a centrist campaign that appealed to non-partisan sentiments. He tried to unite the nation around the theme of hopeful change. Now that he has won, I hope that his governance will be as centrist and reasonable as his campaign. He seems to be surrounding himself with centrist advisors, particularly on economic issues. He is certainly wise enough to want to continue to unite the country rather than bring sharp divisions. My hope is that his administration will be moderate, reasonable, and successful.

My fear is that the worrisome signals in his background may be a true reflection of who he really is and therefore suggest quite a different direction. His voting records in the Illinois and United States Senate were very liberal. His associations with Bill Ayers and ACORN are alarming, as was his long sojourn in a church that seemed to thrive on racial resentment and alienation from the American mainstream.

Obama is beholden to some very powerful left-wing supporters who will expect him to move strongly to the left. Moreover, he will have a strong Democratic Congress that will be able to push through highly controversial and partisan, and, to my mind, dangerous legislation.



THE CRESSET

Let me list a few specific fears. My worst fear is that he will withdraw irresponsibly from Iraq and squander away the hard-won gains we have made in recent months. I believe that the emergence of a decent, roughly democratic, and friendly Iraq would constitute one of the most important foreign policy gains of the twenty-first century. Such an advance could change the face of the Middle East for the better. Success is quite possible but not assured. If Obama follows his own past rhetoric and the promptings of his left-wing supporters, he may lose Iraq and that would be devastating.

My second fear is that he will push through the Freedom of Choice Act, which will in one fell swoop eliminate all the carefully crafted limits on abortion that painstakingly have been achieved at the state and federal level. Such a legislative act will bring forth great social unrest, if not violence. That act will ensure the availability of abortion for whatever reason in whatever way, including even the gruesome “partial-birth” abortion. “Unrestrained killing” is not too strong a phrase to describe the effects of such legislation.

Third, he may well pay off his union supporters by enacting legislation that will disallow the requirement of a secret vote in unionization efforts. That will enable organized labor to intimidate and coerce workers into unions, which will then lead to many more strikes. Unions may once again have the power to disrupt economic life seriously.

Fourth, Obama will be able to build a heavily liberal judiciary, which has had the tendency to usurp the legislative will of the people. Combined with liberal executive and legislative arms of the government, a more liberal judiciary will give us more liberal hegemony over our common lives. Elite liberal legal requirements—such as punishing the Boy Scouts for having their own standards for leaders—may well become the order of the day. The long arm of the law will reach into our private institutions even more than it already has.

Finally, Obama and the Democrats will be inclined to enlarge the size and scope of government, which will simply mean that more of the national income will be allocated by political choice rather than by the choice of private individuals and institutions. That will tend to diminish economic and social creativity and vitality, which have been the prized hallmark of American life.

I certainly hope that my worst fears will not come true. I will closely watch the leadership team and set of political priorities that Obama assembles, listen carefully to his inauguration address, and hope for the best. †

President Obama: Expectations and Constraints

Jennifer Hora

ELECTION DAY 2008 BROUGHT WITH IT AN historic win by the first African-American President along with expanded Democratic majorities in the United States House of Representatives and Senate. In fact, the promise or threat of large Democratic majorities (depending on which side you sat on) was a prominent component of several campaigns. As this analysis goes to print, several races are still undecided, facing recounts or runoffs. And in Georgia, the runoff election is focusing on the political big picture, with both candidates appealing to voters to think about the large scale consequences of their vote—control of the Senate and how Congress will work with the White House.

What dynamics led to these changes? How were the Democrats able to win sizeable majorities in both houses of Congress just a few short years after Karl Rove announced the beginning of a permanent Republican majority? How was a man named Barack Hussein Obama able to win states not won by Democrats for decades, including Indiana, Virginia, and North Carolina, along with a clear majority of the popular vote not seen in twenty years?

One answer to these questions is a backlash against the current unpopular president. Cyclical change is another. In modern politics, no party maintains the White House for long periods of time. Obama supporters point to his messages of Hope and Change. Countless journalists have written about the excitement surrounding this election, energy that has been absent from other recent campaigns. Others attribute the Democratic wins to a weak economy, which traditionally helps Democrats. And minority turnout was certainly much higher than in a typical election year.

Whatever the cause of the considerable Democratic win, expectations are high. The media built up the idea that Democratic control of the Presidency, the Senate, and the House would bring radical change. Candidate Obama estab-

THE CRESSET

lished himself as a candidate with a true rhetorical gift using a campaign message of broad and uplifting themes. These all-encompassing, inspiring messages have increased excitement and expectations for the incoming president. Yet, after an election, the new occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue always experiences considerable limits on his actions, and soon-to-be President Obama certainly will be no exception. People on both sides of the political aisle best consider the incredible constraints on the new President. Barack Obama may be taking over the most powerful elected position in the United States, but that does not mean his power is unchecked. The Democrats may have control of all three elected bodies, but that does not mean they get to ride roughshod over existing policy.

The first and strongest constraint to consider is the power of the status quo. In real estate, possession is nine-tenths of the law, and in politics existing policy has the force of possession on its side. Policy is severely limited by actions already set in motion by previous administrations. For example, there is no reneging on the \$700 billion bailout package passed this fall. A new president can close Guantanamo, but he cannot stop it from ever opening in the first place. The damage to our national reputation already has been done, and the new president will have to deal with those consequences. A new administration can propose new mortgage regulations, but it cannot go back and put them in place to prevent the current foreclosures. Policy decisions are severely limited by the actions of previous administrations.

Another reason the status quo is such a powerful factor is that change is so difficult to achieve. Overwhelmingly, the public favors some type of health care reform, yet this was one of President Clinton's most glaring failures. Politicians, actuaries, and the general public concur that the Social Security system is broken. The predictions are grim. And yet no major change has been made to this policy which impacts all American throughout most of their lives. Change, while an appealing message, is strikingly difficult to implement.

Global and domestic conditions also place severe limits on a new president's power. President Obama will face very different domestic conditions from those Candidate Obama faced when he announced the start of his official campaign almost two years ago. Virtually all economic indicators, including unemployment, foreclosures, and economic output have taken significant turns for the worse since that time. On top of the domestic concerns, the global economy is experiencing a downturn as well, with Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the Netherlands disclosing staggering economic indicators this fall as well. Chinese leaders have gone so far as to imply that the United States is responsible for the current poor international conditions and therefore responsible for taking dramatic actions to solve the current crisis. During the debates, neither Obama nor McCain was willing to suggest which of their proposed spending programs would need to be altered to compensate for current economic conditions. If these conditions continue to deteriorate, certainly President Obama will need to acknowledge and act on these changing domestic and international circumstances.

The final constraint on the newly elected House, Senate, and Presidential majorities is public opinion. American politicians do an amazing job of being responsive to the electorate. Politicians listen to the public, if only because they want to get re-elected. When they fail at this, the other party gets a chance at the controls, as happened when the Republicans took over so forcefully in 1994, and now the Democrats in 2008. When he takes the reins on 20 January, Barack Obama must recognize that, whatever expectations he created during the election campaign, his chances for re-election depend on how he responds to the desires of the American electorate over the next four years. ♣

Roundtable Participants

Chris W. Bonneau ('97) is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh. He is coauthor of *Strategic Behavior and Policy Choice on the US Supreme Court (2005)* and *In Defense of Judicial Elections (2009)*.

Robert Benne is Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society.

Jennifer Hora is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Valparaiso University.