

THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2008 – Part 4

Obama - Time for the Issues

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As November began, with three days to go until the election, I was getting jittery; I was looking back at October in relation to the last article, and ahead to election day, and if there was anywhere that I was not, it was in the present. So, I called the US, seeking reassurance. A high school history teacher in Maryland had told me in June: 'people are going to do what they did in 2006, despite what any polls say, and quietly go into their polling booths and vote anti-Republican, and this time in a really big way; it's not even close.' I knew he was right. The enthusiasm I'd seen in the US was quite abnormal. There were issues at play – health care, war, energy, civil liberties, the big Economy; and, irony of ironies, it was a Bush who, by pandering to the far right and Christian fundamentalist factions, had brought himself and his party into infamy, on a global scale. But my jitters were mirrored half a world away: fears of assassination, fears of vote rigging, especially in such states as Florida and Ohio, fears about what the consequences of an Obama loss might entail. For myself, I was looking at the almost daily US incursions from Afghanistan into Pakistan – not to mention the one into Syria, a seemingly pre-election escalation, perhaps designed to promote an election-related response. Stories were coming in about RP disinformation and intimidation of voters – when these guys get desperate, it's insane not to worry. Here in Sri Lanka, the election was a key topic, with the same fears expressed of assassination and rigging. All eyes were watching. Could Obama really win?

That pre-election weekend the candidates kept up a frenzied pace, visiting states where the race was close, making their final appeals. McCain went from Virginia to Pennsylvania and New Hampshire, and appeared on *Saturday Night Live*; and on 3 November itself to Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, Indiana, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and Pennsylvania. Palin was in Florida, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, Colorado and Nevada. Obama went from Iowa to Nevada, Colorado and Missouri, then to Ohio for three events on the 2nd, including a Cleveland rally with Bruce Springsteen (of "Born in the USA" fame). On the 3rd he was in Florida, North Carolina and Virginia. Biden was in Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Ohio again, and Pennsylvania. Obama was drawing the crowds, urging people not to let up. McCain grew feisty, and both he and Palin warned of the socialism an Obama win would bring. Conservative pundits warned of a one-party state. News was

coming in that in the 30 states that allow voting before election day, turnout was heavy – already some 29 million people had voted, about a third of the electorate.

The battleground states were still battlegrounds, and there was no definitive movement in the widely varying polls. A review of 11 polls taken between 25 and 31 October showed pro-Obama support in a range of 47 to 53%, with his average lead 50.2-43.6%. By election day, 15 polls taken from 29 October to 3 November showed a pro-Obama range of 50 to 55%, with an average lead of 52.1-44.5%. At the end of October it was estimated that 311 electoral college votes would go to Obama, 132 to McCain, with 95 undecided (270 needed to win). By 2 November the estimate was 278 for Obama, 132 for McCain, with 128 a toss up; the figures were the same on election day. Three toss-up states were said to be leaning to Obama: Florida, Virginia and Ohio; and six to McCain: North Carolina, Missouri, Indiana, Georgia, Montana and Arizona.¹

After a few last minute trips to the store, I prepared to settle in to a Wednesday of TV watching, and if Obama won I would be ready to celebrate – not the expectation of big change, regarding the current and unfolding economic disaster or the totally self-interested US foreign policy – but that an opening would remain for the promotion of a progressive agenda; under a McCain/Palin administration, possibly for eight years, a whole list of predictions were certain: from fewer people with access to health care, to increased inequality, and a climate of demonizing that would find many people labeled as traitors – an intensification of the path set by Bush and Cheney. As the polls opened on the East Coast on the 4th, and then across the country, in came the reports: long lines, hours long, and awestruck voters who had never seen anything like this before.²

The first result came in very early: in a small New Hampshire town, which usually goes to Republicans, 100% of the 21 voters turned out: Obama 15-6; if New Hampshire were to go to Obama, the RP would be wiped out of New England (states to the north and east of New York). By the close of polls in Chicago, people were swarming to Grant Park, where 65,000 would be present at an Obama speech, with hundreds of thousands more watching on screens outside.

Presidential Results

As results started coming in from the East Coast states, and then from the Midwest, the extent of the Obama win began to dawn on everyone. Some of the states were for awhile too close to call, but others that had been polled as battlegrounds turned out not to be so. But first, a look at the states where the results were certain.

For McCain (16 states): Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Texas, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Alaska. In six states McCain won over 60% of the vote: in the last four just listed, plus Alabama and Oklahoma (in the latter a high of 66%). He scored significantly better than expected in Mississippi, Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Alaska; and less than expected in Idaho.

For Obama (18 states): in 11 polled more than 60%: Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, California, plus the two highs of Washington, DC (93%) and Hawaii (72%). He won between 57 and 59% in Maine, New Jersey, Michigan and Washington. The low was Minnesota (54%). He ran significantly above expected levels in Vermont, Delaware, DC, New York, Rhode Island, California and Hawaii.

Of the remaining 17 states: in five states, one candidate was either fairly strongly favored, but the opinion poll margin of error made any certainty impossible, or there had been movement toward one. In these states the winner ended up with 53 to 55% of the vote. For McCain: Arizona, West Virginia, Georgia, North Dakota (in the last two his margin was better than expected). For Obama: New Hampshire (better than expected).

As the results came in for the remaining 12 states, the wins for Obama sent waves of cheering and crying around the country. It is worthwhile to look at these in more detail, for they tend to belie the general stereotypes regarding geographic support for the two parties, and thus some of the negative stereotypes about white voters. In the east, three big Obama wins: Virginia (52-47%, last voted DP in 1964); Pennsylvania (55-44%, above the expected, with Obama clearly not losing the blue collar support that had gone to Hillary Clinton); Florida (51-49%, with Bush's brother as governor, where shoddy poll machines had given Bush the win in 2000, and where the Cuban American population no longer so monolithically votes RP).

In the Midwest, three more big Obama wins: Indiana (59-49%, the dead heat as predicted), Ohio (51-47%, where the integrity of the voting system was suspected, a must win for McCain), Iowa (54-45%, a hit better than expected).

In the West, one for McCain (Montana, 50-49%, about as expected), and three for Obama: Colorado (53-46%, McCain had been seen as gaining); New Mexico (57-42%); Nevada (55-43%, above expected).

The results in the five last states came in late, too close for an early call. Obama won North Carolina (59-49%), and McCain won Missouri (50-49%). A final electoral vote came for Obama from Nebraska, which awards on a proportional basis: the vote came from the Omaha area, the first time the state has returned a DP elector.

These crucial Obama wins added to his electoral college total as follows: Florida 27; Pennsylvania 21; Ohio 20; North Carolina 15; Virginia 13; and Indiana 11. McCain picked up the 11 from Missouri.

Finally, a look at a map of the US now shows: the DP as no longer winning only on the two coasts; the DP controlling the rust belt (where the old steel, coal and auto industries predominated), from Pennsylvania to Indiana, and then the upper Midwest; DP inroads, representing huge changes, in the states of Virginia, Florida and North Carolina; DP inroads in the west (Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada). In addition, the RP held on to Missouri by 1%, and to Montana by 3%.

Statistics

In the end, Obama won 362 electoral votes, to McCain's 173. This compares to Bill Clinton's wins (1992, 370; 1996, 379) and George Bush's (2000, 271; 2004, 286). Over 130 million people voted, the most ever; about 64% of the electorate (about the same as in 1960). Almost 65 million people voted for Obama, and about 57 million for McCain—52.83-46.18%; this was the first time the DP had gone over 50% since Jimmy Carter in 1976.

As for voting by population groups, these statistics are obtained from exit polls. After voting, people are randomly sampled (every fifth or sixth person to exit) by use of an anonymous questionnaire. The results are more illuminating in hindsight than as predictors of an election in play, and are considered with much skepticism. Still, at times the

percentage differences may be so huge as to be indicative. With this in mind, people's conceptions echoed earlier polls: 75% thought the country was 'on the wrong track'; the same percentage disapproved of the performance in office of Bush and of Congress. 63% saw the economy as the main issue; 66% were worried about paying for health care; 60% saw importance in the selection of future Supreme Court nominees. Some 60% thought Palin was not qualified to be president.

By groups, Obama picked up the support from 95% of blacks (13% of electorate); 66% of Hispanics (61% in Arizona, 57% in Florida); 78% of Jews; 66% of age group 18-29. Among whites, 43% voted for Obama, the highest for the DP since 1976 (in 2004 Kerry got 41%). McCain won all white age groups except for 18-29 (Obama 54%); white women (54%), men (about 58%, Obama's 41% the largest since 1976); white college grads (51%) and working class (59%); white Independents were split. So were the suburbs, with McCain taking a slight rural advantage.¹

Third Parties

A total of 51 parties ran candidates for president, sometimes endorsing the same candidate.⁵ There were four main third party contenders:

Ralph Nader, running under different parties in 40 states, received 672,195 votes (0.54% of total vote). A lawyer, consumer advocate and diligent campaigner, Nader ran under the Green Party in 2000 (2.7%), and supports issues that the DP won't touch: decreasing the military budget, single-payer health insurance, the impeachment of Bush, public finance of election campaigns. In 12 states he received 1% or more of the vote: Arkansas, Alaska, Connecticut, Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming. The high was in Maine (1.48%). In 24 states he received between 0.5 and 0.99% of the vote. Numbers wise, he received the most votes in California (81,437), followed by Pennsylvania (41,523), Ohio, New York, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota (all in the 30,000s), Massachusetts and Florida (in the 20s).

Libertarian Party candidate Bob Barr, a former RP rep from Georgia, received 496,809 votes (0.4%) in 47 states. Libertarians support a reduced role for government, the separation of church and state, the free market and free trade, abolishing taxes, ending corporate subsidies, right to own guns; oppose alliances with and intervention in other countries, conscription; support the individual's right to make

decisions regarding abortion, sexual partners and the use of illegal drugs. The party received more than 1% of the vote in Indiana, and between 0.5 and 0.99% in eight states: Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, North Carolina, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. In Texas it received 56,397 votes, followed by California (51,529), Indiana, Georgia, North Carolina and Michigan (all in the 20s).

The Constitution Party ran Baptist pastor and talk radio host Charles Baldwin in 41 states, receiving 178,810 votes (0.14%). The party believes life begins at conception, that a family can only consist of a man and wife; supports a federal role only in what is specifically stated in the Constitution, with the states to decide the rest; a strong defense and gun ownership; opposes foreign alliances, globalism and free trade. It received more than 1% in Montana (2.16%) and Utah (1.26%), and from 0.5 to 0.99% in Idaho and South Dakota.

Green Party candidate Cynthia McKinney, a lawyer and former rep from Georgia, was on the ballot in 46 states, receiving 145,488 votes (0.12%). The Green Party is for ending the war, environmentalism, universal health care, non-violence, alternative energy, pro-labour policies; opposes corporate globalism. Percentage wise it scored best in Louisiana (0.47%), Maine (0.4%) and West Virginia (0.33%).

Two of the above candidates may have had the greatest effect in three states. In Indiana, an Obama win by 25,834 votes, the Libertarian Party scored 29,188 (1.07%). In North Carolina, an Obama win by 13,991, the Libertarians received 25,418 (0.6%). In Missouri, a McCain win by 5,861 votes, Nader gained 17,772 (0.61%) and the Libertarians 11,354 (0.39%).

Other main third party contenders included: America's Independent Party, with 36,084 votes (candidate Alan Keyes, assistant secretary of state for international organizations under Reagan, and then a media commentator; the party believes in life from conception, the right to bear arms, opposes the federal income tax); Ron Paul, with 19,858 (RP Texas rep and party primary candidate); Socialist Workers Party, running in 12 states and receiving 9,714 votes, under Róger Calero and James Harris; Socialism and Liberation, running Gloria Estela La Riva in 12 states, 7,377 votes; and the Socialist Party USA, running Brian Moore in 14 states, for 6,545 votes.

The Senate

The pre-election balance in the Senate saw a DP advantage of 51-49; this included two senators who usually supported the DP: Bernie Sanders (Vermont, a socialist), and Joe Lieberman (Connecticut, ran as an Independent after losing 2006 state DP nomination to Ned Lamont, a staunch supporter of McCain, who may be punished for his pro-RP election role). With one third of senators up for election this year, some 35 races, a DP gain of at least five was expected.⁷ Test states where parties retained the Senate seat:

RP (5): Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi (2), Nebraska, Texas, Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Wyoming (2).

DP (11): Louisiana, New Jersey, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Rhode Island, South Dakota, West Virginia.

The DP has so far picked up six, with three RP-held seats still undecided (see below): Colorado (Rep. Mark Udall over former Rep. Bob Schaffer, 52-43%); New Hampshire (former Governor Jeanne Shaheen over Sen. John Sununu, 52-45%); New Mexico (Rep. Tom Udall over Rep. Steve Pearce, 61-39%); North Carolina (state Sen. Kay Hagan over Sen. Elizabeth Dole, 53-44%); Virginia (former Governor Mark Warner over James Gilmore, 54-34%); and Oregon (state House Speaker Jeff Merkley over Sen. Gordon Smith, 47-47%).

The three undecided contests are: Alaska (RP Sen. Ted Stevens, recently convicted on felony counts, leads Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich by about 3,257 votes, with more votes to be counted; the outcome may be known next week; even if Stevens wins, the Senate may expel him; Alaska would then hold another election within 60-90 days); Georgia (RP Sen. Saxby Chambliss has a slight lead over former state Rep. Jim Martin, but state law mandates a runoff election if no one receives a majority of 50% plus one vote, Chambliss currently at 49.8%; the runoff would be on 2 December); Minnesota (RP Sen. Norm Coleman leads Al Franken by 238 votes (out of 2.9 million polled), automatically requiring a hand recount, set to begin on 18 November and lasting some weeks).

A final factor impacting the operation of the Senate is the very liberal voting record of Maine's two moderate RP senators, Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe.

House of Representatives

All 435 House seats were up for election, with the pre-election balance favouring the DP 236-199; the DP lead was won in 2006 when it picked up thirty seats. With four races undecided as of 8 November, the DP has increased its lead to 256-175.⁸

The DP picked up one seat each in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Nevada, Connecticut, Colorado, Illinois, Idaho, Arizona and New Jersey. It picked up two seats each in Maryland, Florida, Ohio, New Mexico, Michigan and Virginia. In New York it picked up three. The loss of moderate RP Rep. Chris Shays in Connecticut now finds no RP reps from New England.

Four DP reps lost, one each in Kansas, Texas, Florida and Louisiana. The loss in Louisiana was of Don Cazayoux, who had won a special election in May to fill a vacant seat in a usually RP area. The two other DP reps who had scored upset wins in special elections in 2008 retained their seats: Bill Foster in Illinois (seat of former House Speaker Dennis Hastert), and Travis Childers in Mississippi.

The situation in the four undecided races shows: Virginia 5th (possible loss of RP incumbent, with more votes to count); Washington 8th (RP incumbent likely to win, many votes to count); California 4th (RP candidate up 709 votes, may require a recount); Ohio 15th (RP lead of 390 votes, with more to count). In addition, two seats in Louisiana will be decided in runoff elections on 6 December.

Governorships

Eleven states held elections for governor. The DP retained control in Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Washington and West Virginia. The RP held on to: Indiana, North Dakota, Utah and Vermont. The only change was in Missouri where the retirement of RP Gov. Matt Blunt set up a contest between DP Attorney General Jay Nixon and RP Rep. Kenny Hulshof; Nixon won with 55.38%. The DP now has 29 state governorships to the RP's 21.⁹ The balance of power implications of elections to state houses and senates are no doubt being analyzed now, and will have to await another article; expect, however, to see a continuation of the trend from 2006 of heavy DP gains; the question is the extent. One noteworthy state result: for the first time in the US a state legislative body will have more women than men: the New Hampshire Senate, 13 women and 11 men.¹⁰

State Referendums

There were 153 measures up for vote in various states. In several, people approved the state floating bonds in order to raise money for special projects (as opposed to raising taxes).¹⁰ With regard to abortion: South Dakota narrowly rejected a ban except in cases of rape, incest and mother's health; Colorado rejected by 3-1 the definition of life as beginning at conception; and California rejected parental notification for minors. California approved the definition of marriage as between a man and woman only (52-48%). Two states banned gay marriage: Arizona and Florida, joining 26 states. Arkansas banned unmarried couples from adopting or fostering children. Washington passed physician-assisted suicide (joining Oregon). Massachusetts decriminalized the possession of small amounts of marijuana; Michigan approved its use for medical purposes (joining 12 states). Nebraska banned gender or race-based affirmative action in government employment, contracting and education.

McCain and Obama Address the Nation

As the Obama win became clear, McCain supporters, gathered in a hall in Phoenix for his speech, became subdued, turned off the TV showing results, and listened to live bands. At about 10 pm, East Coast time, McCain arrived. After the very negative tone of his campaign and criticism of it, McCain had a lot of ground to cover if he wanted to redeem a positive image. He began by saying that the American people "have spoken clearly," and he had called Obama. When the crowd started booing, McCain hushed them up. He respected Obama for his ability and perseverance; and admired and commended him for inspiring hopes in people who felt they had "little at stake or little influence." He referred to old injustices, and the "cruel and frightful bigotry." The crowd applauded. McCain pledged to help Obama lead the country through the present challenges. He urged everyone to offer Obama their "good will and earnest effort," to come together and find compromises. He took the blame for his failed campaign (to cries of 'No!'). He thanked his supporters, family, Sarah Palin ("an impressive new voice" in the party), and his campaign organization.¹¹

After the speech, CNN showed live shots of people celebrating in front of the White House, in Times Square – it looked like New Year's Eve. Then, close to midnight, Obama appeared at Grant Park in Chicago. He began by saying that tonight has provided an answer to those who doubted that in the US all things were possible, that the dreams of the founders are alive, and the power of US democracy. People

had provided the answer because they believed that "this time must be different"; it was an answer by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native Americans, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. The answer had led people, who for so long were cynical, fearful and doubtful, to "put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day." He referred to an "extraordinarily gracious" call from McCain, and the people clapped. The US was "better off for the service rendered by this brave and selfless leader." Obama thanked Joe Biden, Michelle Obama, his children and grandmother, sisters and other family, campaign manager David Plouffe, chief strategist David Axelrod and the campaign team. But, he said, the victory belonged to the supporters and voters. It was a campaign built by "working men and women" who had contributed; it drew strength from youth "who rejected the myth of their generation's apathy," and from canvassers and volunteers. This had not been done to win an election, or for Obama, but because of the huge task ahead, challenges that are the "greatest in our lifetime – two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century." People were in the forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, parents were worried about their mortgages, health bills and money for children's college education. It would be a long road – new energy, jobs, schools, threats to meet, alliances to repair, but "we will get there." The crowd chanted, 'Yes We Can.' This would be done as it has always been done: "block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand." The election victory was a chance for change, but it won't happen without a "new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice." "... if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers." While the election has been won, people must have the "humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress." The crowd cheered. To those who did not vote for Obama: "I hear your voices. I need your help. And I will be your president, too." To those abroad, "from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand." "To those who would tear the world down: We will defeat you." The strength of the US comes not from arms and wealth, but the ideals of democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope. Obama then related the story of a 106-year-old black woman, a story worthwhile quoting as it indicates Obama's oratory ability:

"She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons – because

she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America – the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can. At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes we can. When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs, a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can. [crowd, Yes we can.] When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can. [crowd, Yes we can.] She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that "We Shall Overcome." Yes we can. [crowd, Yes we can.] A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to the screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes we can. [crowd, Yes we can.]"

Concluding Thoughts

As Obama spoke, he looked at the crowd, not into the cameras. At times everyone was totally silent, some almost in rapture. Jesse Jackson cried. The significance of some of the words he used – calloused hands, the depression, New Deal – cannot be underestimated; it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression and hated by conservatives, that led to the backlash some call 'McCarthyism' in the 1940s and 1950s – the demonization of communists and socialists and radicals and liberals and anyone who did not follow the conservative agenda, producing a massive suppression of civil liberties, and among many people a fear of speaking out and getting involved.

It's been a very long road back from that time also. And here the role played by two people (as representative of much wider movements) must be acknowledged. The first is Ralph Nader, who has been criticized, demonized and scapegoated by liberals for taking votes away from DP candidates. But he has spent decades tirelessly keeping the progressive agenda alive at the grassroots level, and winning the votes of people who are not afraid of voting for someone who

cannot win; some of the issues at play this year were pushed from the bottom up. The second is Jesse Jackson, who throughout decades of DP politics that have shifted ever more to the right, kept pounding away, in brilliant oratory that just nailed the issues – how we laughed when he identified the biggest recipient of housing subsidies in the U.S. as being the man sitting in the White House.

The importance of issues was one of the most notable aspects about this campaign year. Some issues are now mainstream: global warming, alternative energy and the need for a new energy policy (and the connection with jobs), the connection of free trade and jobs, the importance of getting US forces out of Iraq (unfortunately into Afghanistan). Early on, it seemed to me that for the DP to win, given the similarities in DP and RP positions, its candidate would have to *appear* to offer some restraint on neoliberal economic policies. The events since the collapse of Lehman Brothers, however, nullified the DP dilemma – even the RP has had to support such restraint, not to mention outright nationalization. And, given the Bush/RP record and its lack of a plan, within the economic context, the RP could only revert to a campaign of demonizing labels – this was a necessity, not just an indication of personal meanness.

The words class warfare, nationalization, redistribution of wealth, the left and socialism (although what is meant is state capitalism) have been introduced into the public domain – again. There is a stunning contradiction here: what was meant as a smear to tarnish Obama and DP policies has turned out to be an introduction. And the negativity didn't work. Indeed, if people mistakenly associate Obama with socialism, it may increase the attraction. It is also a wonder that the RP avoided the word 'communism,' for this could have perhaps been more influential. Mention must also be made of a growing change in concept – the erroneous association of 'big government' with the DP, while the RP has excelled in big defense and big, now humongous, debt.

Here, in this discussion of issues, I must digress to two of a seemingly more technical nature, but which are, in fact, crucial to the functioning of electoral politics, if the desire is democracy, and especially in the U.S. but other countries as well; they should top the DP agenda, but do not come close. The first concerns campaign finance. This year \$5.3 billion was spent by candidates, parties and interest groups in the campaigns for president, Senate and House, 27% more than in 2004: \$2.4 billion was spent on the presidential election.¹² Obama put together a brilliant fundraising campaign, and

McCain agreed to public financing for the period from September, and there is no doubt that money affected results. Obama should now make a priority of getting influence via money out of all national campaigns – there is no legitimate reason to oppose public financing; he should be the last candidate to benefit from the present corrupt system. In addition, it is time that the US government – president and Congress – established a national voting system for national-level offices. With so many systems in place, even within states, people have lost faith in the integrity of the ballot. Delay in action on this will belie good words about change and democracy.

The second issue here is the use of opinion survey research, or polling. While some practitioners do realize the limitations, opinion polls are used by individuals, groups and the media to push agendas – to change public opinion, and not to reflect it. In its perhaps worst form, polling can be used to create and reinforce negative stereotypes. It was seen this year that polling results were used to give an image of close races: in Hillary Clinton's attempt to catch up to Obama, and in McCain's 'narrowing' of the gap with Obama. Results were also used to make erroneous predictions: that supporters of a defeated Clinton would turn to McCain; and that women supporters of Clinton would turn to Sarah Palin. The pervasiveness of these images, here in Sri Lanka also, was truly amazing. It is known that poll results differ depending on who is asking the question. For example, a question regarding preference for Obama or McCain finds different results if the questioner is CNN or Fox. There is also the problem of the many people who refuse to be polled, and a new problem of polls that do not call cell phones in addition to homes. A long-recognized problem concerns the widely varying results depending on how a question is worded. And finally, the presentation of results without mention of the built-in margin of error is simply misleading, but this is usually what happens. A poll that comes out 50-46%, with a margin of error of 3%, may actually mean a result of 47-49, or 48-48, or 49-47 ... With the spread of survey research the problem is going global, unfortunately to be seen in Sri Lanka also. Priority should be given to avoid use of this method for propaganda purposes.

With the global economic situation today, we cannot afford to wallow in stereotypes to the preclusion of issues. The situation in the US is bad, worse than reported or imagined, and the effects of what has been made in the US are spreading worldwide. Every day there is evidence; one recent statistic jumps to mind: in the US, \$2 trillion of value has been lost in people's retirement accounts (which had been invested in the

stock market or in bad bonds) – that's one half of value.¹⁴ Out of this economic crisis, no doubt, will come a positive consequence in the decrease in US financial power, but the world is in for a long period of greater suffering, and not just for people in the US.

In such a situation it is certain that sections of the far right, including religious fundamentalists and white supremacists, will find more support. Already, this year has illustrated the split in the RP and conservative movement, mirrored in the McCain campaign organization. Old sides are no longer clear.¹⁵

And it is time to realize that the promotion of old stereotypes will only serve to strengthen the right. In this context, and with regard to the US, it is time to discard the myth of the 'apathetic' voter, of apathy as the only reason why people do not vote – voiced by some people while also deriding the similarity between the DP and RP! It is also time to reject the derogatory images of people from various regions in the US – one example I heard here comes to mind: a sneering reference to a progressive as a 'white man from the Midwest.' And it is also time to discard the language of skin colour itself, along with identification by only ethnicity or religion.

I have already heard it said that Obama's win was due to the minority vote – this is partly true, but generally wrong. If Obama had lost, no doubt the blame would have been put on white racism – again, partly true, but generally wrong. Thus do the demonizers perfect the use of the Catch-22. And, since I have an audience now, I'll use it to make a plea to the citizens of Sri Lanka, to reject the stereotype of foreigners as representing the views of their governments or a country's policies, or their agendas of dominance and interference. And, reject the stereotype of certain foreign women. And, reject the corresponding language of hate, too often used to marginalize the foreigner in public gatherings.

As it stands, Obama now has a great opportunity to talk about the issues, the choices and the limitations – to directly address the US public. For this to happen, however, he must, and unlike the normal DP and RP elite – including the Clintons, see people as being ready to listen and able to understand. We will see how elitist Obama really is, or is not. While the election of an African American president is an achievement of both Obama and the US electorate – one that I thought I would never see in my lifetime, and over which I have cried – this is not what is most important. Rather, for now, the political space has been left open, and opened a little more. If, however, the US president and Congress continue the policy of the permanent war economy to achieve US

domination, in foreign and domestic spheres – in which a person is either for you or against – there will be no change. Either the US must be a nation equal to all others, or watch the further pauperization of the bottom 70-80% of people, in every country, including the US.

Notes

- ¹ For these estimates, see realclearpolitics.com, 11.10-11.1.08.
² Deborah Hastings, "Long Lines Greet Voters as Polls are Deluged," AP, 4.11.08.
³ For projections in this section, see "Latest State-by-State General Election March-Ups," cpolitics.com, 9.10, 26.10 and 2.11.08, for final results, see realclearpolitics.com.
⁴ For the above stats, see: Andy Barr, "2008 Turnout Shatters All Records," politics.com, 5.11.08; "The Latest from the Exit Polls," cpolitics.com, 5.11.08; Eric Kleefeld, "Obama's Resounding Victory, By the Numbers," talkingpointsmemo.com, 5.11.08; David Paul Kuhn, "Exit Polls: How Obama Won," politics.com, 5.11.08.
⁵ For details on the candidates below, and on state results, see thegreepapers.com.
⁶ For Senate results, see: John Nichols, "Franker Re-elected in Minnesota and Other Close Races," thenation.com, 5.11.08;

- "Darr Picks Up at Least Five Senate Seats, Four Races Still Undecided," cpolitics.com, 5.11.08; and Andy Barr and Josh Krushnick, "Key Races Remain Undecided," politics.com, 7.11.08.
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⁸ Kirk Johnson, "Democrat Wins Missouri Governor's Race, but GOP Keeps Infant," ny.com, 5.11.08.
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¹⁰ AP, "Voters Let States Borrow, Leave Taxes Alone," msnbc.com, 5.11.08. The information in the rest of this section is from: Josh Goodman, "Guide to the Most Interesting State Ballot Measures, from Abortion to Transportation and Crime and Punishment," cpolitics.com, 4.11.08; and AP, "California Gay Marriage Vote Still Undecided," thejournal.com, 7.11.08.
¹¹ John McCain, "Conceal or Speech," cpolitics.com, 5.11.08.
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¹⁴ AP, "CEOs, Famos Investors Hit by Market Plunge," The Journal.com, 5.11.08.
¹⁵ T.J. Dinno Jr., "What's So Far You On, Comrade," nbc.com, 24.10.08. ■

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Marx is back

Hasan Suroor

LONDON: With capitalism in crisis, Karl Marx has become fashionable again in the West. *Das Kapital*, his seminal work, is set to become a best-seller in Europe.

In his native Germany, copies of *Das Kapital* are reported to be "flying off the shelves" as failed bankers and free-market economists try to make sense of the global economic meltdown.

John Schmittmeyer, head of the Berlin publishing house Dietz, is reported as having said that the sales of the works of Marx, and Friedrich Engels, have trebled. "Marx is fashionable again... We have a new generation of readers who are rattled by the financial crisis and have to recognise that neo-liberalism has turned out to be a false dream," he told *The Times*.

A dramatic rise has been reported in the number of visitors to Marx's birthplace in Trier. And film-maker Alexander Kluge is planning to turn *Das Kapital* into a movie.

Western leaders who once sneered at Marx's dense tome, breezily dismissing it as a "doorstop," have been seen chanting *Das Kapital* in recent weeks. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has been spotted "flicking through" it, German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück has said nice things about it, and even the Pope has praised the book for its "great analytical" quality.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams recalled Marx's analysis of capitalism, saying: "Marx long ago observed the way in which unbridled capitalism became a kind of mythology, ascribing reality, power and agency to things that had no life in themselves."

Free-market cheerleaders such as *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* have become interested in Marx. There has been a wave of soul-searching analyses of whether he was right, after all. Courtesy: *The Hindu*