

OUR VOICE

A great change is taking place on the U.S. political scene, and another fundamental one is approaching in what has been by far the longest and most fascinating electoral process in that country's modern political history. Only a few days before the elections, polls show that it is practically certain that Barack Obama will occupy the White House next January 20. All the polls, from the general ones to those taken by specific socio-economic, race-based, religious and generational groups, put Senator Obama leading John McCain by an average of 10 points. It is just a matter of time before the hypotheses of Obama's victory are confirmed. If Obama wins, we will be witnessing the most dramatic, transcendental moment of modern U.S. political history: the most symbolic place of power in the United States —Lyndon B. Johnson referred to it as the house that is not only white outside, but inside— will be occupied by a black politician, constituting a radical turn in the history of the U.S. presidency. Obama will have inspired the majority of his country's electorate with Martin Luther King's maxim that he likes repeating so much: "the fierce urgency of now," that is meeting up with history today, just around the corner.

Several factors are present in this great political moment. On the one hand, U.S. economic and political decadence has become unbearable, and, given the standard of living of the people and the leading class, this is not something any politician with aspirations can play around with. Having been the superpower for decades and a singular democracy has been a way of life to which everyone has become accustomed. And, it is to be expected that the idea is that things continue that way. As the Bush administration begins fading from the political scene ahead of time, it is in itself evidence of the urgent need for someone to occupy the presidency who proposes the recovery of lost well being and power. This can be via applying a new, broader social policy, by going back to "soft, smart power," or by recovering a multilateral approach in foreign policy. Obama has appeared in the political-electoral firmament as the competent option, as the politician who understands the need for this change generation-wise, and as a "transformational figure" of change, as General Colin Powell called him when he threw him his support.

The paradox: by presenting himself as the "war hero" and the "hard" candidate, McCain was left without a platform. As a result, he had no proposal in the face of two things: the possibility of winning in Iraq politically and militarily and the solution to the most important economic crisis since the Great Depression, both inherited from Bush, his ominous shadow. So, his political persona deteriorated because of three strategic mistakes: first, his inability to articulate a fitting proposal for these crises; second, by opting for dirty campaigning against Obama, which has backfired on him —Powell himself criticized him harshly for it when he supported Obama; and third, the grave mistake in judgment of choosing inexperienced, ignorant Sarah Palin as his running mate, who has scared off undecided voters and independents, decisive in an election like this one.

With things as they are, only two eventualities could stop Obama's victory: if Al Qaeda became the big elector and perpetrated a destabilizing or terrorist action that would help McCain win. It is more than obvious that, for Bin Laden, the election of the black senator would put an end to the business of war he started in 2001; that is why he prefers McCain and the continued exercise of "hard power." The second would be that a significant number of white voters, caught up in the Bradley-Wilder syndrome in the solitude of the polling booth, decided to vote based on race for McCain. Everything seems to indicate, however, that neither of these two scenarios is in the interest of either a rather worse-for-wear Bush or an angry U.S. society.

The United States is not the only partner of Mexico's that has gone through controversial elections. Canada's balloting has been completely overshadowed by its neighbor's race: 37 days of whirlwind campaigns cannot compare with the U.S. electoral paraphernalia. In fact, some media have even suggested that the Obama-McCain face-off was followed even more closely by Canadians than the race between Conservatives and Liberals (which Prime Minister Stephen Harper won, although with a minority in Parliament). This victory was due in large part to the fact that Harper was able to unite two parties on the conservative side of the political spectrum, and now it is the Liberals, who have governed for most of Canadian history, who are divided and have a weak opposition leader, Stéphane Dion, about to resign.

Certainly, for the Conservative Party, it is a dark victory. Although it secured 17 more seats than it had had in the outgoing Parliament, for a total of 144, it did not achieve a majority. And it will undoubtedly need that majority in the coming years, when Harper will have to face an economic crisis from a limited, much-questioned position.

The outcome of the Canadian elections cannot be read without taking into account the U.S. process and situation: Canada's anticipated elections responded to Harper's concern that a possible Democratic victory south of his border would spark an inclination on the part of his own population to elect a government compatible with the U.S. one. This was particularly the case given the prime minister's tendency to implement right-wing social policies and talk about conservative values in a liberal Canada, plus the close alliance between Stephen Harper and George W. Bush, unpopular the world over, an alliance his opponents have bitterly criticized.

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Three articles with different aims and focuses in our "United States Affairs" section deal with the U.S. elections. The first, written by myself, looks at the ways in which race has influenced the campaigns and how the frontrunner has been conceptualized, depending on the actors and special interests, as more or less black, or more or less white. The topic is important because it demonstrates the existence of a racially polarized U.S. society. Analyst Bernadette Vega shows us the dilemma facing the U.S. electorate: the two visions of the country that the contending parties represent. Today, they are more at odds than ever about political strategy and economic ideology, above all because of the two issues that have been particularly telling in this election: the economic crisis and the Iraq war. Lastly, to provide the context, María Cristina Rosas reminds us of some of the characteristics of the U.S. electoral system, and contributes her comments about some of the implications that different electoral outcomes could have, not only in the presidential race, but in the make-up of the new House and Senate, both in general and for Mexico in particular.

Undoubtedly, the unfortunate —not to say disastrous— Bush administration, about to come to an end, has been a factor not only in determining the electoral outcome, but also the course of many other aspects of the development and destiny of today's globalized world, almost always and in most spheres, for the worse. In our "North American Issues" section, economist Elizabeth Gutiérrez Romero contributes her reflections about the balance sheet of the Bush administration's performance in multilateral trade. Her point of view is that the field is strewn with failures, both in matters of free trade and of the regulation of the agricultural sector and negotiations about services.

A series of events over the last few months will undoubtedly have a definitive effect on Mexico's medium- and long-term future. Our "Politics" section includes two articles about the energy reform, an issue that has divided Mexican society. Jurist Manuel Barquín Álvarez helps us contextualize the debate historically, presenting a brief but substantial chronicle of the zigzags of oil ownership and exploitation since before it was nationalized until today, sketching the arguments for and against private participation in the industry. For her part, Olivia Sarahí Cornejo explains why she thinks that the intention from the very first proposal to reform Pemex has been to privatize it; she builds her argument on a detailed examination of the official diagnostic analysis of the oil industry that was the basis for the reform. These two visions will help our readers understand the political and economic complexity of the issue of energy in Mexico.

The last few months have also been a time for commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Mexico's 1968 student movement. Two participants in those events contribute to this issue with original articles, whose main value is that they have managed to keep away from the traditional ready-made accolades. Former political prisoner Carlos Sevilla ventures a chronicle of that year using the formal structure of a play, with its acts, actors and plot, and, of course, its denouement: the significant influence the movement had and continues to have on Mexico's democratic development. Former student leader Roberto Escudero looks at the issue from the perspective of the similarities that those complicated times in Mexico have to the protest movements against the Olympics in China this year. In both cases, the proximity of the respective sports events influenced the strategies chosen by the actors in conflict and the decisions —more or less extreme— made from positions of power.

These few months have also been times of concern and anxiety for Mexican society because of the uncontrollable spike in criminal violence expressed in an unprecedented increase in kidnappings and drug-

trafficking-related executions. For this reason, we include in our “Society” section an article by public security specialist Carlos Flores, who sketches a panorama of a desolate future unless real, sincere efforts are made to attack the problem at its root: impunity and corruption.

The last few months have not only been difficult for Mexico. Different events and trends have affected the well-being of peoples the world over. The U.S. financial and the world food crises are perhaps the two most important. We have included contributions about the latter in the “World Affairs” section. Researcher Camelia Tigau finds that the food crisis, one of the main causes of which she considers is the dizzying rise in the production of biofuels, has had both losers, who suffer the famines, and winners, among which are aid agencies like US AID, which has capitalized it politically in its favor. Economist Ciro Murayama also writes about this topic in a more theoretical article to explain the causes of the crisis in the relationship among production, demand and supply of foodstuffs in a globalized world with increasingly demanding emerging economies, showing how in the case of Mexico the problem sharpens because of its proverbial historical lag in agricultural production.

The country recently lost one of its most eminent left-wing politicians, respected by political actors of all tendencies. Gilberto Rincón Gallardo was not only a politician, but also one of Mexico’s most widely recognized social activists of the last 50 years, as his most recent cause shows: his untiring struggle against discrimination and for equal opportunities for all marginalized groups in society. His former collaborator in the National Council to Eliminate Discrimination, José Luis Gutiérrez Espíndola, writes about this facet of his life and his contributions to the issue of discrimination. Jesús Rodríguez Zepeda, Rincón’s advisor and close friend for years, writes about his trajectory as a left militant and undoubtedly influential figure in Mexico’s process of democratization.

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This issue’s “Art and Culture” section begins with an article about one of Mexico’s most prolific landscape artists: Nicolás Moreno, a painter for 64 years. His work is a pictorial legacy of the evolution of the country’s landscape in all its different facets. The next two articles deal with the contemporary situation of Mayas in Quintana Roo, particularly in the region near the Mayan Riviera, one of the country’s exclusive tourist areas that has grown the most in recent years. The first describes the efforts of the Mayans living in the municipality of Felipe Carrillo Puerto to keep the authentic aspects of their culture alive when faced with the onslaught of the commercialization of the Mayan heritage for tourism. The section concludes with a look at a school established to preserve traditional Mayan music and musical instrument making.

“The Splendor of Mexico” visits the Mayan Riviera. First, we take a trip through two of the most outstanding archaeological sites in the area: Tulum and Cobá. Both are written by the director of the Quintana Roo Office of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Then, we offer a brief description of Mayan communities involved in sustainable tourism, which allows visitors, for example, to come into contact with the *aluxes*, fantastic beings who have inhabited Mayan jungles since the time of their pre-Hispanic ancestors. We conclude the section with a photographic panorama to give an idea, even if only succinctly, of its infrastructure and immeasurable natural beauty.

The “Museums” section visits the Caste War Museum, located in the town of Tihosuco, where visitors can learn about the history of one of the bloodiest wars of resistance the Mayas ever fought, a history interpreted by the Mayas themselves.

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde