

The 2008 U.S. Elections

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Aaron Josefczyk/Reuters

Fortunately for Mexico the candidates in the United States are not focusing on immigration. Thus are we spared an avalanche of simplistic statements that would only widen the spiritual distance between the two countries and, along the way, a few poisoned darts of anti-Mexicanism. The central issues at this stage are the economy and the need for a profound change after the failed military adventure in Iraq.

It is unnecessary to go into any more detail about the economy: according to a recent Gallup poll, more than half those surveyed think the country is going through something like a recession. This is not the product of feverish imaginations; it is based on figures and the increasingly ominous perceptions about consumer confidence, employment levels and financial markets.

The central axis of candidates' discourse —McCain, Clinton and Obama alike— does not hide the fact that the United States is going through a particularly complicated time: the economy is suffering from the impact of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the price of oil has hit U.S. consumers' purchasing power hard. The political discourse tries to connect with a generalized feeling of disenchantment with the Bush years.

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It is no secret to anyone that the Bush administration has behaved in a way that has made it difficult for even his Republican supporters to find things to be proud of. The list of problems that Bush leaves to his successor seems interminable, but the most widely shared feeling is frustration. In the first place, for not having been able to overcome the

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atmosphere of generalized terror that still permeates daily life in the United States. The feeling that at any moment something may happen continues to be the terrorists' greatest success. The degree of alarm of the security forces and that you breathe in from the moment you step onto U.S. soil is what Bin Laden and his accomplices can consider a political, media objective fulfilled. Americans are at war against a non-state actor that they have not been able to defeat or contain. The culture of fear tires any society, especially if important successes cannot be presented in the fight against evil, and if that most precious article for every human group, security, cannot be recovered.

A society at war comes under enormous stress, which makes a terrible combination with the news coming in from Iraq. This military intervention, with its clear imperial traits, has become a maze for the U.S. government and people. The feeling that they are going through a second Vietnam, that is, that defeat is imminent, cannot be minimized.

The power of a nation is built on the basis of substantive elements (wealth, population, natural resources, technology, etc.), but also with complementary factors that can be equally important, linked to the public mood, the degree of social cohesion, the leading elites' credibility, the values that are supposedly being defended vs. the reality, and, finally, the confidence a nation has in itself for dealing with its challenges.

The complementary factors vary according to the context, and not all groups reflect them in the same way. Undoubtedly, the country that won the Cold War is not in its finest moment; its morale is not encouraging. But it is far from the decline that some of its critics bode. This is not a terminal patient. The electoral process is a reflection of a society that is seeking in different ways to extricate itself from this situation.

In the Republican camp, the advance of the senator from Arizona exemplifies the rush toward the political center with the hope of leaving behind the extreme right-wing positions of the Bush administration. Every time McCain wants to illustrate his aims by likening them to those of successful, respected governments, he has to hark back all the way to Ronald

Reagan.¹ Clearly, for a veteran like him as well as for his generation, it is not difficult to look back at the glorious times of the eclipse of the Cold War, but for younger people, the reference is a little remote, and the Republicans are quite well aware of it.

Similarly, if the demographics make it difficult for the Republicans to connect with younger people, low incomes are not helping any either. During the Bush administration, the most underprivileged sectors of society have seen the gap separating them from their rich countrymen widen, and tax cuts, combined with bad economic prospects for 2008, make for a devastating outcome.

On the other hand, different communities have seen how the patriotic discourse, fostered by a culture of fear and permanent war on terror, has encouraged certain nativist, xenophobic tendencies that were previously better kept under lock and key in a society interested in "political correctness".

On a global level, there is increasing interest in the U.S. primaries, and a quick review of the international dailies that have shown an interest in covering the process—there is good coverage of these events on the Council on Foreign Affairs website—shows disenchantment or even open rejection of the Bush administration, and, by contrast, a certain nostalgia for the administration of that great president, William Clinton. This has accentuated two perceptions that have emerged in the U.S. strategy debate: the loneliness of power and the erosion of its global leadership.

It is not easy, then, for McCain to overcome this negative trend. But, there can be no doubt that he is trying to conceptually, politically and symbolically. He makes the quest for a new era a systematic part of his discourse, and therefore he returns time and again to the origins of the republic, invoking Hamilton and the great destiny of the American people. Will he be able to generate the credibility he needs to win the November elections? That is the big question.

In the Democratic camp, the most noteworthy thing is the polarization between Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton. At the time of this writing, the nomination will be resolved in the Denver convention, but the country's political and economic context is ripe for both candidates' cause. Each holds important cards in his/her hand.

The first and most obvious is that they are the opposition to the outgoing administration. They do not have to pay for a large part of the fallout from the last eight years and although they have been cautious about the more sensitive topics, their positioning is better than McCain's.

The second is their personal condition: a woman and an African-American automatically enjoy a privileged position with minorities. They are both unprecedented and new, and they automatically represent the less favored sectors of society. Both connect well with the big social and ethnic differences that spiritually divide the American nation. In this context, we have to underline that the civic religion and exaggerated patriotism of recent years have filled commercial buildings and malls with the stars and stripes, but the strength of a nation, I suspect, is elsewhere: in the social cohesion and in the broad sense of belonging that today's nativist tendencies are far from encouraging.

In this context of fragmentation, some Americans ask themselves if the founding fathers were alive today, would they be dismayed at how far we are from the ideals of equality for all today? Being black, Asian or Latino right off the bat marks a person's possibilities for social mobility. Race-linked social prestige also continues to be the motivator for systematic segregation. In its last report (2008), Human Rights Watch said that the prison population of Afro-American descent is four times that of Caucasians. Just a coincidence?

In this context, it is interesting to see how these situations shape political behavior. Polls after Super Tuesday show that all the ethnic groups tend to do the same thing: vote for someone like themselves, or at least for someone who does not make them feel like a liability to the country. In some states, like New York, Latinos were an important base of support for Hillary Clinton's win, and, in California, their contribution, together with that of Asians, was decisive.

More traditionalist whites say that they threw their support to hopefuls like Romney and Huckabee, now out of the running, because they—as opposed to McCain who seems more linked to experience—defend the values they believe in. What times do we live in when structural, porous racism is considered a fundamental value to be defended, when a moderate like the senator from Arizona, situated among the less radical Republican traditions, is chastised by sectors of his party for not being “hard-line”?

There is still a part of the United States that continues to think that the big stick should not only be wielded to dissuade, but rather frequently and without calculating the results. That America seems to be upset, uncomfortable because it cannot close off its country like they seal the compounds where they live. This social group, used to living among guard dogs, security guards everywhere and universal suspicions that any belt or pair of shoes might contain an

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explosive, still thinks that despite the really meager results of this administration's war on terror, that is the right way forward.

But let's get back to the Democrats. Of course, Mrs. Clinton is better positioned for finally winning the Democratic nomination for three reasons. The first is the political coalition behind her. The second is her personal experience; and the third is that with regard to handling the economy—the top issue on everyone's mind—she has better credentials than Obama. But she does not have all the cards, because Obama's sweep has not finished yet.

Barak Obama is a man determined to change the social and political rules for doing politics. The key to his success seems to be in the fact that he is an Afro-American who acts like white people who suppose that command is theirs to be had just because they are white. And there is no doubt that his name, which means “blessed” in Swahili, is a kind of manifest destiny. He is a mix of black and white and he has never portrayed himself as a victim; what he has done is to use his irresistible, poetic oratory, with his rhythmic panther-like walk, to seduce an electorate that wants changes. Obama has wrought a fundamental transformation in the discourse of minorities by shifting the axis of his speeches from reproaches for the wrongs against his community, to presenting himself as the promise of a solution to the problems that the United States confronts today.

As philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy rightly pointed out with almost clairvoyant foresight,² in his political discourse, the senator from Illinois replaced the affirmation of identities as origin and destiny with something as generic as a hope for change. That is why the groundswell of support for him seems unstoppable. ■■■

NOTES

¹ John McCain, “An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November-December 2007).

² Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo* (Paris: Grasset, 2004).