

Rethinking President Obama's Victory and Challenges

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Jason Reed/Reuters

From the shadows into the light.
From euphoria to a forced landing.

President Barack Obama's resounding victory has already resolved two questions that nourished the United States' unprecedented electoral process: What happened? And why did it happen? These questions were answered by a kaleidoscope of voices led by a broad spectrum of academics, politicians and public opinion-makers, including everyone from the most famous editorialists to talk show celebrities.

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However, this article has the aim of taking this reflection about this historical cycle even further, seeking an explanation of the "hows" of these events; the underpinnings of the forms, considering them a valid intellectual concern because they are part of the analysis of the new administration's prospects.

One means for exploring possible answers is looking at the foundational idea of "frontier" that accompanied the origins of the United States as a nation, sketched by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the nineteenth century, and still current today.¹ The "frontier" constituted as a civilizing framework, understood as a discontinuous, moving line that gives rise to new identities that demonstrate people's changing views on their culture. It is useful for filling in an analysis of the

recent electoral process when the United States once again reinvented itself. In that process, racial, gender, social class and generational frontiers moved and intersected, including not only prominent political actors, but also ordinary citizens who voted in unprecedented numbers.

The frontiers of race and gender stand out particularly, represented by two figures, Barack Obama and Sarah Palin, since they speak to social minorities' mobility from the periphery to position themselves at the heart of the political debate.² Palin's case merits a separate analysis since the stereotype as a legitimate gender frontier prevailed, disqualifying her as a vice presidential candidate.

Despite the fact that a woman positioned herself in the major leagues of U.S. politics during this campaign, the "politically correct" factor favored Obama's racial identity, black/male; while the criticisms ratcheted up against Palin, white/woman, without any mediation about their "incorrect" content.

THE ELECTION

Despite the long, intense electoral process—more than 20 months—with the most funds raised in the history of the United States—almost US\$1 billion—the pessimistic predictions of it wearing out the electorate were proven wrong. Proof of that are the record number of people who registered to vote and then actually turned out to cast their ballots.

Having had the opportunity to participate as a direct observer of the elections, I saw that part of "American exceptionalism" is that citizens have an entire gamut of options for making their will felt at the ballot box: voting in person, ahead of time or absentee voting, as well as assisted voting to guarantee that the differently abled can exercise their right to vote. There is even something called a provisional vote that allows a citizen to vote even if they do not appear on the registered voters' rolls; these votes are counted after an electoral official investigates the voter's identity.

Even recognizing that electoral norms are specific to each of the 50 states, the versatility for guaranteeing the right to universal suffrage is an admirable parameter that should be considered for countries like Mexico.

The campaigns of John McCain and Barack Obama went in entirely different directions. McCain was incapable of forcing the Republicans to be self-critical, reiterating the idea of "Country First" with no new content, a reflection of a country that emerged from its vertically-narrated history. Obama,



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on the other hand, must reflect on the more than 58 million Americans (46 percent) who did not vote for him.

This number will be one of the challenges that will accompany him during his administration, together with all the others that arise from the grave economic crisis's effects on most Americans' lives, which the new president has offered to gradually deal with. To avoid the spread of the crisis, his bail-out plan includes, among other things, fiscal incentives; increased unemployment benefits; and special protection for small and medium-sized businesses and state and municipal governments. So, the caliber of the short-, medium-, and long-range challenges will involve actions that practically make them politically risky investments for Barack Obama.

In this context, his decision-making capability and firmness of character, together with putting together an efficient, harmonious and highly qualified cabinet, will have to be key pieces in exercising good government. Given that the new president remained very close to people throughout his campaign, his strategy for maintaining that closeness remains to be seen, given the magnitude of the problems he is going to have to deal with in office.

VICTORY AND ITS CONNOTATION

Obama won, setting an undeniable precedent for his country. We can say that the circumstances surrounding his personal history, political career and campaign are distinctive: he is the concretization of the "self-made man" and the result of the relationship between blacks and whites, in addition to being a firm promoter of the potential for partnerships among communities and the construction of social capital. All this makes him the ideal person for a nation whose exceptionalism is confirmed by his arrival in the presidency, making him the most influential person in the world.

Regardless of this, there are still variables to be analyzed in an interdisciplinary framework that would allow us to elucidate the Obama phenomenon. Among these are the participation of the fourth estate (the mass media), the impact of new

technologies on bringing together the Internet-based social networks (Youtube/Facebook) and the study of the interactions among different levels of discourse (image and body language, which ended up identifying each of the two candidates).

There was particular interest in the content of Obama's official web page *vis-à-vis* his campaign strategy, since it showed the scrupulous identification of particular networks of potential voters including more than 20 categories like workers, Latinos, Republicans, rural residents, senior citizens, small business owners, Arab-Americans, the disabled, sports enthusiasts, etc.

One part of it, "Kids for Obama," targeted children 12 and under, using the argument that it was "a great way to introduce [kids] to politics," inviting them to join the Democratic candidate's campaign—a move that would have been seriously controversial in Mexican elections. Among the activities promoted for children were Obama "T-shirt Thursdays"; asking children to accompany an adult to vote on election day and to tell that adult that a vote for Obama was a vote for them; or writing letters to local newspapers explaining why Obama should be president.

In conclusion, in the dialectic of history, the failed presidency headed by a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ended up being the main thing that gave rise to the first Afro-American president of the United States. The elections that swept Barack Obama into office were a demonstration of participatory democracy sustained in an inclusive, transparent, highly competitive process.

Moving ahead now from hope to the consolidation of a political leadership will require filling the ideas with substance. If Obama managed to transmit in his campaign that,

among other things, U.S. democracy can be transformed into a system of more horizontal relations to keep the Washington bureaucrats or the Wall Street speculators at bay, it is now the charismatic leader's turn to become a leader who develops, that is, one who listens, weighs and analyzes to give his public policy proposals effective content. This will in turn have an impact on the scale of values, attitudes and beliefs that are what will really make it possible to change the face of the United States, based on inclusion, social justice and the promotion of peace and tolerance.

The transcendental nature of this historic moment lies in the recognition of the victory of the American people themselves, who demonstrated great civic commitment reflected in respect for their institutions. Obama has become a phenomenon, paradoxically favored by the negative trends in society and the economy that are eroding politics, closely identified with corruption in the public eye.

Bailing out politics, which requires new democratic vitality as well as social realignment, will create the foundations for the United States' beginning a new cycle. However, only in the future will we be able to analyze whether the nation has really left behind what Noam Chomsky years ago called the de-politization of its socio-political consensus. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, Chapter 1 (Charleston, sc: BiblioBazaar, 2008). Originally published in 1920.

² This is why I am omitting Hillary Clinton, who has a long political career behind her.

