

The Birth of the Virtual Political Community and the Victory of Barack Obama

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Barack Obama's victory brought hope and change to the United States. This was no miracle, but the result of hard, creative, imaginative work by the president's advisors, who rode the wave of Internet.

This process began from the time of the Democratic primaries, which were very aggressive, fraught with attacks and counter-attacks between nomination seekers. The situation was by no means an easy one, with a young, relatively nationally-unknown senator from Chicago facing the prominent

senator from New York, Hillary Clinton, undoubtedly known and recognized throughout the country. She obviously had acquired great stature as first lady, the wife of one of the most popular presidents the United States ever had, due to his achievements like a 2.3-percent growth in employment, a US\$230-billion fiscal surplus, and an economy that grew constantly, averaging 3.7 percent a year.¹ Success is very catching, particularly by people close to you.

However, we cannot deny that Hillary has proven herself to be a very intelligent woman who knew how to temper that extremely ambitious, temperamental personality she revealed when she moved into the White House. She also became

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more of a negotiator and less contentious. To these two factors (the Clinton halo and her great abilities) should be added the Democratic Party political machinery, which in the main backed her candidacy. Everything seemed to point to Hillary Rodham Clinton becoming the Democratic nominee, but suddenly, things began to turn around, and the nominee turned out to be Obama. Everyone knows the end of the story: Obama was inaugurated January 20.

I want to answer several questions in this article: Why was Obama able to position himself as the Democratic candidate despite his clear disadvantages *vis-à-vis* such a strong rival? Why did Obama beat the Republican candidate? And, will it make a big difference for Mexico that John McCain did not win?

I will start by answering the second question. Although the answer may well seem too obvious to many today, it was not so clear only a few months ago, when uncertainty reigned and almost no one was placing any bets.

U.S. political and electoral analysts have a golden rule: "Americans vote with their pocketbooks." This logically means that if the economy is growing, they will very probably vote for the party in office. People also have to *perceive* it as a period of growth, since, if the party in office does not know how to transmit to the citizenry a feeling of recovery or hope for a better future, people will probably not vote for it, either.

In the recent elections, the economic indicators predicted an economic slowdown in the best of cases, that has turned into a full-blown recession. President Bush followed the canons of economic liberalism to the letter: the invisible hand of the market had to be allowed to ensure economic development all by itself. The financial deregulation Alan Greenspan began would undoubtedly result in unstoppable growth for the U.S. economy. Several years of economic boom seemed to confirm the hypothesis; however, what was really happening was that many financial irregularities were being permitted that ended up creating castles in the air. They fabricated a fictional economy. The norms, institutions and checks and balances that serve to regulate savage capitalism became diluted, leaving behind only its bitterest face.

On the one hand, top executives' inflated salaries (including the so-called "golden parachutes" or multi-million-dollar severance pay packages) created perverse initiatives to raise profits at the cost of the future. On the other hand, over-lending, without really checking out borrowers' ability to pay,



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as well as loans linked to other loans and speculative earnings, turned that invisible hand, which was supposed to balance everything out, into a hand immobilized by arthritis responsible for enormous social disparities and banking and business crises. The fictional economy collapsed, starting with the stock market and reaching into the heart of production. So, despite the fact that the United States is immersed in a war that has dragged on for a long time, the main point of interest in the campaigns was the domestic economy, with its US\$482-billion fiscal deficit, 6.5 percent unemployment and negative growth rate of -1 percent.²

If all the economic indicators pointed to a recession, why was there any doubt at all that the new president would not be a Republican? Because the Democratic candidate, Obama, was an Afro-American. In the U.S. presidential elections, although nobody said it openly or recognized it politically, race was a factor for the first time. It was no longer a matter of one candidate of color among many white contenders, but someone who became the Democratic Party hopeful with real possibilities of becoming president. As Mark Danner said, "The radicalism of Barack Obama lies not in his policies but in his face."³

Analysts began to worry that there could be a "curtain effect" (also known as the "Bradley effect"), which is when people interviewed lie to pollsters and, in the solitude of the polling booth, without risking other people's moral judgment, they succumb to racist sentiments. This means that even though people consider it politically correct to vote for a candidate of color and express that opinion to pollsters (which was clearly the case in the pre-vote polls), when it came time to vote, behind the curtain, they might vote for John McCain just because he was white. Fortunately, behind the curtain, people were swept away by the idea of change. Of a change not only of President Bush's policies and the Republicans, but the big change that meant that an Afro-American would occupy the White House. Race was not a disadvantage for Obama even among white workers, who had seemed more resistant to the idea of being governed by an Afro-American president.⁴

The election outcome undoubtedly expresses great maturity on the part of U.S. society, and is one of those actions that should be recognized and admired by humanity. There are some kinds of progress that make us all proud, and this is one of them. Even though it should be obvious that an intelligent, educated man, concerned for the less privileged, with an interesting proposal, should have a chance of winning regardless of the color of his skin, many centuries had to go by and many generations had to fight so something like that could happen.

The economy stopped growing; thousands of jobs were lost; the recession came to stay; and Americans once again voted with their pocketbooks. And as they did, they also provided a respite and sowed a seed of hope not only for the United States, but for the world as a whole, given the very critical state of the global economy.

Now, let us return to the first question: Why did Obama win the primaries and become the Democratic candidate? We have to recognize that his victory is a fundamental change in U.S. society. The elections were not won in the broadcast media; a television commentator's support or media visibility were not the determining factors. This time, the Internet played a fundamental role, creating a new phenomenon that requires further explanation. After the November 4 victory, computer "geniuses" will always be necessary in elections, not just something extra and fun, but an essential part of the central strategy.

Obama used social technology to win the Democratic Party primaries and surpass the powerful Hillary Clinton. Through his Internet network, he made himself known to thousands of people little by little and got them to join his campaign. His web site was constantly clogged with a multitude of supporters who visited it every day and found there a message that attracted them, that echoed their own feelings and thoughts; a multitude that began to create a surprising virtual reality. Through the blog his advisors designed, he managed to create a network that surpassed all their expectations: www.my_barackobama.com, better known as "my BO," was the door to a new world in elections, which significantly helped campaign finances by raising, for example, the astounding sum of US\$55 million in just one month. Constant meetings were held all over the country to raise money. The goal was not so much to get big donations from a few people but small contributions from millions of supporters, for which Internet was a fundamental tool.

Obama's team managed to create an army of volunteers for the campaign war. They managed to handle and dominate



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the news and the data, and they were easily able to figure out how to take a persuasive message and capture the imagination of the undecided by setting up a data base about them.

Without a doubt, during the primaries, before the open signs of the crisis became visible, it seemed that the motto of these elections was going to be, as David Talbot said, "This Year It Was the Network, Stupid," and not the economy. The cyber-magicians understood that people feel more comfortable with the new technologies today, and that they were not just something for a tiny elite or a few academics, but that they were a phenomenon that turns our societies upside down and redefines them.

Other candidates also used the Internet, but Obama put it at the center of his campaign.⁵ He called in one of the Facebook founders as a member of his advisory team and put him in charge of the project. On the other hand, Obama's experience in a nongovernmental organization that works in a low-income community served to help him create the most advanced online collective through an extraordinary political machine. Obama's ideas were uploaded onto Internet and then spread by visitors to his site. His speeches aired on YouTube with millions of hits. His campaign army made thousands of calls to people who had logged onto the site, thereby reinforcing the network, making it more effective and building on that politically. There is no doubt that they made marvelous use of this tool.

The Clintons, for their part, had the backing of the party machine, which they headed up. Comparing, then, 48 percent of Obama's campaign contributions were under US\$200 each, while only 33 percent of the Clintons' were. Although the Clintons also used the web, they did not do it with Obama's ingenuity or intensity. McCain's Internet campaign, on the other hand, was a disaster; they really could not get their networks up and running and the sites were badly designed and unattractive. Perhaps in this strategy more than in any other, the difference between the 72-year-old Republican candidate and the 47-year-old Democrat was noticeable.

Obama will very probably continue to use electronic networks to get the support he needs for his policies from Con-

gress. The president will have to work in line with what he promised, since he has always presented himself as a different kind of politician, and he must not forget the Internet-based social networks he built. That is the only way he will be able to keep the constituencies that supported him and begin, starting now, to consolidate them for his eventual reelection. It is true that he will enjoy the support of a Congress completely dominated by the Democrats, but that is no reason for him to be able to forget that, given the crisis conditions and the tough decisions he will have to make, he will also need support from that new virtual social organization, turning it into a real grassroots organization embedded in the Internet networks.

Why did Obama win? Because he was able to ride the crest of one of this era's most spectacular inventions, steering down the information superhighway like a Formula 1 driver: really relaxed, "really cool," like everything he does. He was able to speak to hundreds of thousands of apparently apathetic young people who believed in him, found out about him, got to know him, respected him and decided to mobilize to make a difference. Sixty-six percent of people under 30 threw their support to the Democratic Party.⁶ However, even though young people participated more than in the previous elections, they did not come out in the same numbers as in 1992, when Bill Clinton defeated George Bush, Sr.⁷

It is important to note several of the important changes that took place during this last election. Enormous numbers of voters—almost one-third of all those registered—decided to cast their ballots by mail before November 4. Several states that rarely throw their support to the Democrats did this time: among them, Colorado (which in the past had only been won by Clinton) and Virginia (which in the past had been won by Johnson). Obviously, Obama got 95 percent of the votes in the black community, and, above all, he sparked a big mobilization by black community members in states like Georgia, Missouri and Nevada. Undoubtedly, there were also important changes among young, Hispanic and university students and faculties, who distanced themselves from the Republican Party. Only 32 percent of voters from those groups described



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themselves as Republicans, as opposed to 40 percent who said they were Democrats; four years ago, the proportions of supporters for the two parties among those population groups were identical.⁸ Twenty-eight percent classified themselves as independents, and of these, 52 percent voted for Obama.⁹

The support from Latinos was surprising, since initially they had aligned themselves with Hillary Clinton. But on election day, they came out for Barack Obama, who got 60 percent of their votes. Their vote was crucial. In 2004, only 50 percent of Hispanics supported Democrat John Kerry.¹⁰ Fifty-six percent of women voters cast their ballots for the Democratic candidate, as did 78 percent of Jews and 54 percent of Catholics; but 54 percent of Protestants and 74 percent of evangelical Christians chose McCain—picking Sarah Palin as his running mate helped out with this last group. Seventy-three percent of people who earn less than US\$15,000 a year voted for Obama, as did 55 percent of those earning between US\$30,000 and US\$50,000, while 51 percent of those earning between US\$100,000 and US\$150,000 preferred McCain.¹¹

One particularly important issue for Mexico is U.S. foreign policy, where we may see a change. It will not be immediate or complete, but at least there is some hope. If McCain had been voted in as president, Mexico particularly would have been given special treatment since he is very familiar with our country and has been part of important bilateral negotiations. However, his foreign policy advisors like Randy Scheunemann, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, James Woolsey, John Bolton and Max Boot, are considered neo-conservatives. Therefore, the militarist strategy this group set up when it was in power during George W. Bush's presidency would have tended to consolidate despite its clear failure. The neocon vision of preventive attacks on possible enemies to avoid potential strikes has upped the number of open enemies and driven away allies. Not in vain does Joseph Nye remind us how important soft power is in diplomacy and of the need to build alliances, maintain friends and use multilateral bodies.

We can think that the Barack Obama-Hillary Clinton duo will opt above all for negotiation and forging consensus through soft power, without renouncing military might. Pulling out of Iraq is no simple task, and must be done gradually if they are to avoid creating more instability than already exists. In the case of Mexico, I think that its proximity and the Clintons' knowledge of our country may be fundamental factors



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for establishing good relations, a possibility that would not necessarily come about by itself on urging from President Obama, who is a protectionist—he has already mentioned renegotiating NAFTA—and will tend to concentrate more on the domestic agenda. He most certainly will not forget to take into consideration that globalization requires countries to come up with joint strategies to solve problems that know no borders.

Former President Bush's legacy to the new occupant of the White House is, frankly, a disaster. And not only for the United States, given that a profound recession is looming in many countries of the world. In addition, several of its old allies have distanced themselves from the United States. For all of these reasons, today more than ever a world leader is needed who can throw off the parochial vision like the one neoconservatism proposes and understand the call for seeking joint solutions, not only for the good of the international community, but for the good of the United States itself. A grand strategy is required for devising a design for peace in the twenty-first century.¹²

On the other hand, we must not forget that since the last elections, and even since the 2000 elections, clearly, the United States is a divided society. While the 9/11 terrorist attacks managed to unite the population in times of crisis, in 2008, disregarding Republican attempts to impose the message of the need to take a hard line in times of war, voters opted for a change. But it would be a mistake for President Obama to think that he should govern only for the more liberal segments of society. He has to get the support and awaken the enthusiasm of the entire population to be able to start up the machinery he needs for economic recovery. Barack Obama got 52 percent of the popular vote. He did not get the vote of the majority of the white population, although no other Democrat has either since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.¹³ His term of office will not be easy, but for now, he has the support not only of a large part of the U.S. population, but also of most of the world's population. We all hope that his performance is up to what the times demand. **NM**

NOTES

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² Executive Office of the President of the United States, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/>; Robert Pear and David M. Herszenhorn, "White House Predicts Bush Will Leave \$482 Billion Deficit," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2008; News Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, available on line at www.bls.gov.

³ Mark Danner, "What's at Stake?" *The New York Review of Books* 17, vol. LV, November 6, 2008, p. 6.

⁴ "The so-called Bradley effect did not exist," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008, available at <http://www.com.news.politics.2008nov05>; Kate Zernike and Dalia Sussman, "For Pollsters, the Racial Effect that Wasn't," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008; and D. Alandete, "El presidente electo ganó más apoyo de los blancos que Kerry hace 4 años: El voto joven y el de las minorías propiciaron la victoria demócrata," *El País*, available on line at www.el_pais.com/articulo/internacional, accessed November 11, 2008.

⁵ David Talbot, "How Obama Really Did It," *Technology Review*, published by MIT, September-October 2008.

⁶ BBC Mundo Internacional, "Quien votó por Obama," available on line at <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>.

⁷ D. Alandete, "El voto joven y el de las minorías propiciaron la victoria demócrata," *El País*, on line at www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional, accessed November 6, 2008.

⁸ Alec MacGuillis and Jon Cohen, "A Voted Decided by Big Turnout and Big Discontent with GOP," *Washington Post* on line at www.washingtonpost.com, accessed November 4, 2008.

⁹ D. Alandete, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Chishti Muzaffar and Claire Bergeron, "Hispanic Vote Goes for Obama but May Not Lead to Quick Action on Immigration Reform," Migration Policy Institute, available on line at www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/printcfm, accessed December 2, 2008.

¹¹ BBC Mundo Internacional, "¿Quién votó por Obama?" *op. cit.*

¹² Fareed Zakaria, "Wanted, a New Grand Strategy," *Newsweek*, available on line at www.newsweek.com/id/171249/output/print, accessed December 2, 2008.

¹³ *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008, available at www.latimes.com/politics2008, accessed November 5, 2008.