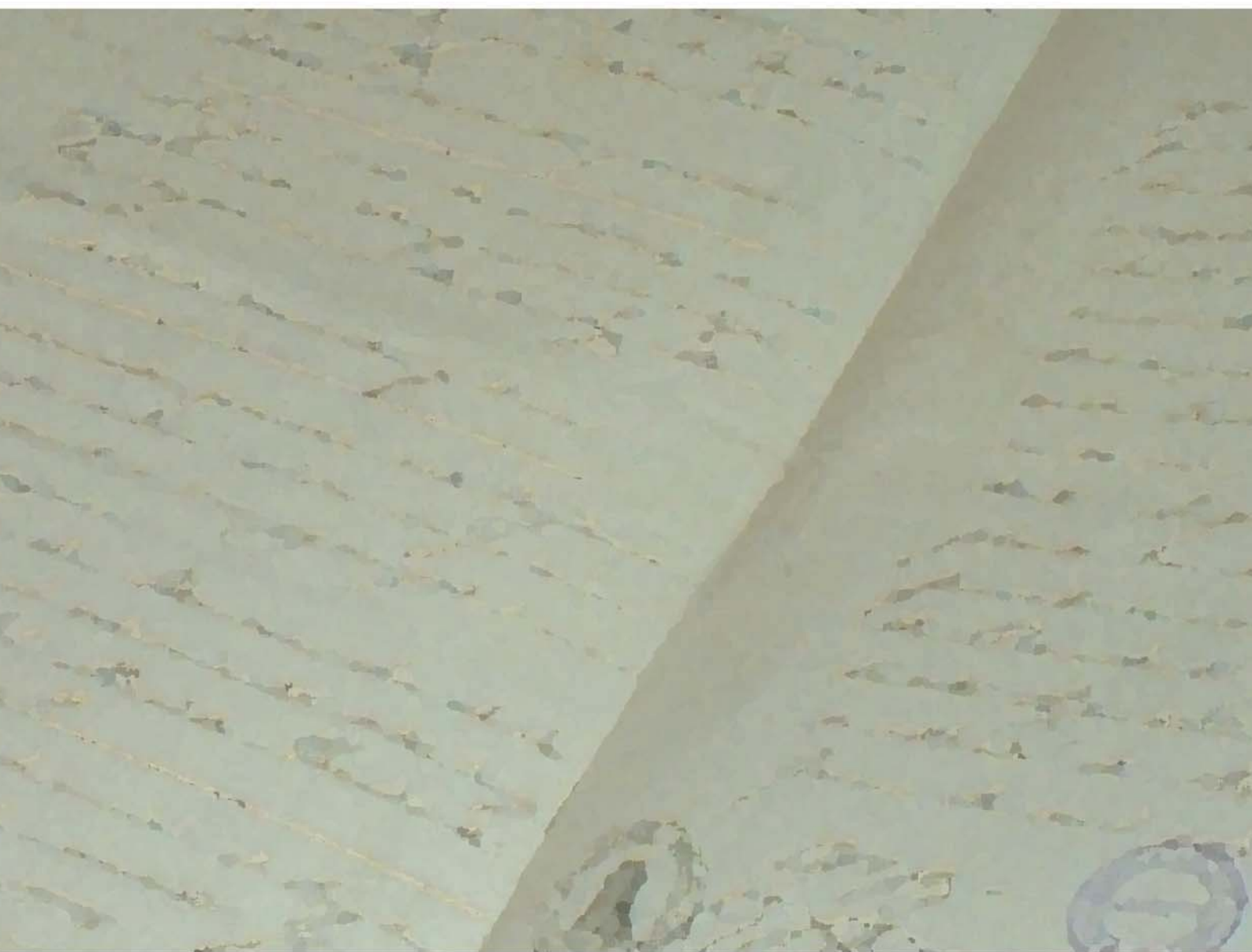




The 2008 Presidential Election in Historical Perspective

Andrew Richards



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in Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Seldom in recent US political history has a presidential candidate generated more enthusiasm and excitement in the course of a typically long and arduous primary and general election campaign than Barack Obama who, upon taking office, became the 44th, and first African-American, President. Reactions to his victory, and that of his party in the Senate and House of Representatives, bordered on the euphoric. The result was variously labeled “historic”, “unprecedented” and even a “genuinely realigning election”. *Time* magazine likened Obama’s triumph to that of Franklin Roosevelt’s landslide victory of 1932¹.

It is certainly the case that the November 2008 elections marked and consolidated a remarkable turnaround in the fortunes of the Democratic Party. In 2004, George W. Bush had been reelected over Democratic rival John Kerry by a relatively comfortable margin of 2.4 percentage points (51.2% versus 48.8%), or just over three million votes. The 62 million votes gained by Bush were, at the time, the highest total ever achieved in a presidential election. Yet by 2008, the tables had been turned decisively. In the context of a deeply unpopular departing incumbent President, two increasingly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and, above all, a grave economic crisis, Obama swept to victory over Republican rival John McCain by 6.8 percentage points (53.4% versus 46.6%), or just over 8.5 million votes. His winning total of 66.86 million votes bettered that of his Republican predecessor in 2004, thereby setting a new record for votes gained in a presidential election. In the course of doing so, Obama not only held every state won by Kerry in 2004, but added nine states which had voted Republican in

2004: Colorado, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico and, crucially, the more populous states of Florida (with its 27 electoral college votes), Indiana (11), North Carolina (15), Ohio (20) and Virginia (13) (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 5)². In conjunction with increased majorities for the Democrats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives³, the new President and his party were in a commanding political position to implement their programme.

Conversely, the results of November 2008 represented a stunning deterioration, in the space of only four years, in the fortunes of the Republican Party. In fact, 2004 had been the high-water mark for the Republicans since 1952, when Dwight Eisenhower won the Presidency, and arguably since Herbert Hoover's victory in 1928. It was the only year since 1952 in which Republicans had not only emerged with a majority in all three branches (the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives) but had gained ground in each institution⁴. With 55 Senators, the Republicans equaled their largest number ever, while securing their largest majority in the House since 1929. Not for nothing was 2004 seen as a "plateau on which the GOP would consolidate and begin a climb to a more commanding majority status" (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 6; 5-6). The publication of books such as Tom Hamburger and Peter Wallsten's *One Party Country: The Republican Plan for Dominance in the 21st Century* and Thomas Edsall's *Building Red America: The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power*⁵ reflected hopes (or fears, for that matter) that a long-term partisan realignment in favour of the Republicans was underway. Yet such hopes proved very short-lived. In the course of the 2006 mid-term elections and the 2008 presidential-year elections, the Democrats gained 12 seats in the Senate and 49 seats in the House of Representatives, moving in the process (in 2006) from minority to majority status in both chambers⁶. At the moment that Obama won the Presidency in November 2008, the Democrats had gained congressional majorities exceeding those that the Republicans had enjoyed in 2004 (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 6)⁷.

Given this remarkable change of party fortunes in the course of George W. Bush's second presidential term, was Obama's emphatic victory in November 2008 therefore inevitable? And was it, in fact, as emphatic as it first appeared? What was the nature of his support (and that of his defeated rival, John McCain), and does it form the basis, as some commentators have contended, for a longer-term shift, or realignment, of the electorate's preferences in favour of the Democratic party? I address these questions as follows. In Part

One, I examine the dynamics of the 2008 presidential campaign, focusing in particular on the closeness of the race until shortly after the Democratic and Republican party conventions, and assessing the impact of the economic and financial crisis which engulfed the country soon thereafter. The latter, in fact, proved devastating to the Republican campaign, and swung the election decisively in Obama's favour. In Part Two, I examine the broad-based nature of Obama's electoral support in 2008, discuss in particular the scope of white voters' support for a candidate who was the first African-American in US history to be nominated by either of the two major parties, and assess the degree to which the scale of the Democrats' victory, and the nature of their winning coalition, are sufficient for 2008 to be considered a "realigning" election with long-term consequences for the balance of electoral power between Democrats and Republicans. In Part Three, by way of conclusion, I review, tentatively, the possible implications of Obama's victory for the future of race relations in the USA.

1. AN INEVITABLE VICTORY?⁸

As Campbell (2008: 2-3 ff.) notes, there were many reasons to expect that 2008 would be a good year for the Democrats. Opinion polls revealed considerable public preoccupation with the direction being taken by the country, the war in Iraq continued to be extremely unpopular, the economy was performing sluggishly, oil prices were rising significantly, and the incumbent President continued to suffer very low poll ratings. On the other hand, there were equally powerful reasons to expect a close presidential election. Above all, this was an open-seat election (that is, one in which neither an incumbent President was running for reelection – the case of George W. Bush in 2004, for example – nor an incumbent Vice-President was running for election as President – the case, for example, of Al Gore in 2000). History has demonstrated that such open seat elections tend to be much closer:

near dead-heat elections are uncommon when an incumbent is in the race and common in open seat contests. Almost half of open seat elections have been near dead heats. Near-dead-heat elections are more than three times more likely without an incumbent in the race than with an incumbent (Campbell 2008: 3).

For all presidential elections between 1868 and 2004, 46% of open seat elections had been "near dead-heats" (compared to only 14% of those with an incumbent running), 38% had

been “competitive” (compared to 45% of those with an incumbent running), and only 15% had been “landslides” (compared to 41% of those with an incumbent running)⁹. As Campbell (2008: 4) argues, in such circumstances, “retrospective voting is conditional”, whereby voters’ reactions to the outgoing administration do not carry over fully to the next election when the incumbent is no longer running: “accountability is partly assigned to the in-party and partly to the president himself. Successor candidates receive only part of the credit or blame for the successes or failures of their predecessors”. As such, they are essentially “muted referenda”. Thus John McCain, the Republican candidate, could expect to suffer to a certain extent from the perceived failings of the Bush administration, but nowhere near the extent to which Bush himself would have suffered had he been running again.

Furthermore, recent trends in partisanship, coupled with increasing ideological polarization amongst the electorate, also pointed in the direction of a close election in 2008. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the balance of party identification in the USA had strongly favoured the Democrats, before shifting sharply, by the mid-1980s (that is, halfway through Reagan’s two-term presidency) to parity between the two parties. This approximate parity has endured, albeit with a slight recovery for the Democrats since 2004. Campbell (2008: 5) argues that

there was good reason to suppose that the electorate’s predispositions would lead to a fairly even division of the presidential vote. Democrats outnumbered Republicans in 2004 by about 9 percentage points among all respondents, but by about 5 points among registered voters and by only one point [...] among reported voters.

These trends in partisanship have been accompanied, moreover, by the increasing ideological homogeneity of the two parties between the 1960s and 1990s, at the same time as the electorate overall has become more ideological and less moderate –

as a result, both partisanship and ideological orientations have become more strongly correlated with the vote choice [...] One would expect that the increased polarization of the electorate and the parties would discourage partisan defections and keep the division of the vote closer to the even division of partisans (Campbell 2008: 6).

In this sense, President Bush’s low poll ratings may not have represented the burden for Republican candidate McCain that they otherwise might have represented. As measured by Gallup, Bush’s approval ratings dropped 17 points, from 48% at the time of his reelection in

2004 to only 31% by July 2008. But this growth in his detractors “was largely among his own partisans [...] very few Democrats approved of President Bush in 2004, so there was not much room for further decline by 2008”. From McCain’s point of view, therefore, those Republicans (and independents) dissatisfied with Bush “would be constituencies more easily won back in 2008. The many conservative Republicans disapproving of President Bush were unlikely Obama voters, which is exactly what exit polls later confirmed”¹⁰ (Campbell 2008: 6).

Finally, what of the candidates themselves? Both Obama and McCain endured difficult nominating processes, albeit for different reasons. While the Democrats in general were optimistic about the party’s chances of capturing the White House in November 2008, they were sharply divided, as the primary contests subsequently demonstrated, between two outstanding and formidable candidates. Hillary Clinton won many of the large states (including California, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania), nine of the final fifteen primaries, and did not concede defeat until 7 June 2008, more than five months after the Iowa caucuses had started the official process of delegate selection (Campbell 2008: 7). While both she and Obama were ideologically similar, with strong liberal voting records in the Senate, the nature of the primary results had cast doubt on Obama’s ability to retain, in a general election, the support of white working-class voters in the so-called “rust belt” areas who had formed one of the bastions of Clinton’s support in the primaries. Certainly, “their intense battle for the nomination left the party with some scars”. As exit polls subsequently indicated, not all Democrats who had voted for Clinton in the primaries voted for Obama on general election day¹¹.

For their part, while the Republicans settled on their candidate long before the Democrats, they did so with a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm. In the absence of a clear and undisputed conservative candidate capable of energizing the party base, McCain was able to secure the nomination from amongst a relatively crowded field of candidates. With the surprising failure of former Mayor of New York Rudolf Giuliani (the early favourite) in the Florida primary, and with the help of independent and crossover votes in the open primary states, McCain had gained a commanding delegate lead over his nearest rivals, former governors Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, by “Super Tuesday” on 5 February 2008. When Romney withdrew two days later, McCain had effectively captured his party’s nomination, though without in any way exciting its base. In

sum, Campbell (2008: 8) concludes that neither Obama nor McCain “had an easy ride to their conventions, and their roughly equal nomination troubles (though of very different natures) might have set the stage for a roughly equal November vote”.

Finally, their contrasting characters and political profiles also appeared to indicate the strong likelihood of a close outcome to the presidential election. In Obama, the Democrats had selected an extremely inspiring and charismatic candidate, and an eloquent orator to boot. Yet no African-American had ever before secured the nomination of one of the major parties, let alone won the Presidency itself. Moreover, with his 95% liberal voting record in the Senate, Obama was identified clearly as a northern liberal (though, as I discuss below, his platform was not the most progressive of all the Democratic contenders for the party’s nomination). Since the mid-1960s, such an ideological position in US politics has proved to be an electoral liability, with Democratic candidates for the Presidency labeled thus – Hubert Humphrey in 1968, George McGovern in 1972, Walter Mondale in 1984, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and John Kerry in 2004 – all suffering defeats at the general election. (In contrast, more conservative and/or centrist Democrats – Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Al Gore – fared relatively better). Meanwhile, in McCain, the Republicans had nominated an acknowledged war hero, a self-styled maverick who had broken with his party on several occasions (on the issue, for example, of campaign finance reform), and who, in the course of the 2008 campaign itself, criticized President Bush, particularly with respect to fiscal policy. It is worth remembering, moreover, that he had been a strong and credible rival of Bush for the Republican nomination in 2000, and had been courted by Democrat John Kerry in 2004 to be his Vice-Presidential running mate. In terms of his voting record in the Senate, he

was almost perfectly positioned between a 50 percent moderate score and a perfectly consistent conservative score [...] Assuming that critical swing votes are won in the political center (or even somewhat right of center in modern American politics), McCain seemed better positioned for the general election campaign (Campbell 2008: 8-9).

In the event, the opinion polls prior to the 2008 Democratic and Republican party conventions reflected indeed a very close election. Gallup’s mean pre-convention polls of registered voters for the period from 1 to 24 August 2008 put Obama at 51.3% and McCain at 48.7%. The Real Clear Politics average of polls for the same period put Obama at 51.7% and McCain at 48.3%. The narrowness of these margins, when combined with the greater

propensity of registered Republicans to actually turn out and vote, meant that the election “going into the conventions was a toss-up” (Campbell 2008: 9-10). Indeed, the average of polls during the ten days leading up to the Democrats’ convention in Denver showed that McCain was closing the gap on Obama, trailing by only 49.4% to 50.6%, while the final two pre-convention Gallup polls showed the election to be tied: “Despite Iraq, a sluggish economy, an unpopular president, and all the elements of the Democratic year, McCain was still quite clearly in the game” (Campbell 2008: 10).

The conventions proved successful for both parties; while the Democrats rallied to Obama, McCain succeeded in finally energizing the Republican base through his totally unexpected choice (see below) of the Governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, as his vice-presidential running mate. The net effect of the conventions seems to have benefited McCain who gained 2.6 percentage points among Gallup’s registered voters over the period commencing seven days prior to the Democratic convention and ending seven days after the Republican convention. McCain emerged from the convention period with a small lead according to the Gallup and Real Clear Politics polls. As Campbell (2008: 11) points out, the fact that he had any kind of lead after the conventions “is both important and exceptional”, not least because it broke from the historical link of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent president and preferences for the incumbent party’s presidential candidate. In all presidential election years since 1948, when the incumbent President’s approval rating has exceeded 46% in July, the incumbent party’s candidate has led in the September opinion polls. When it has been under 46%, the incumbent party’s candidate has trailed in the September polls. However, 2008 was different: McCain maintained a small lead in September, despite the fact that in July, President Bush’s approval rating had stood at a disastrous 31%. Clearly, “all of the factors that made 2008 so clearly a Democratic year were not enough to establish Obama as the post-convention frontrunner” (Campbell 2008: 11).

Furthermore, in the fifteen presidential elections held between 1948 and 2004, twelve had candidates with discernable leads in the Gallup polls of early September, and *eleven* of these had gone on to win the general election in November. Thomas Dewey, Republican nominee in 1948, was the only candidate with a clear poll lead in early September to go on to lose in November, after a truly extraordinary campaign mounted by the seemingly doomed incumbent President, Harry Truman¹². Thus there were “also historical reasons to consider

McCain's post-convention poll to be important to the election" (Campbell 2008: 11).

In the event, of course, McCain lost to Obama by a margin, as we have seen, of 6.8 percentage points. In explaining how "the floor fell out from under the McCain campaign", Campbell (2008: 11) pinpoints the key role played by the severe financial crisis which, while "nowhere in sight" during the Democratic and Republican conventions themselves, proceeded to engulf the country, and the world, soon thereafter. In short, the "Wall Street meltdown crisis in financial institutions hit in mid-September, dominated the remainder of the campaign, and shifted a significant portion of the vote from McCain to Obama" (Campbell 2008: 13). In the course of the month, the government seized control of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the two giant government-sponsored mortgage institutions, Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, Merrill Lynch was purchased by Bank of America, and the government made a \$85 billion bailout loan to insurance giant AIG. On September 19, President Bush, labeling the crisis "a pivotal moment for America's economy", asked Congress to "act now to protect our nation's economic health from serious risk", and proposed a \$700 billion financial institutions bailout bill for it to consider. On September 24, John McCain controversially suspended his campaign to return to Washington for the bailout talks, and called for the postponement of the first presidential debate, scheduled for a few days later. On October 3, a revised version of the \$700 billion Bipartisan Emergency Economic Stabilization Act was passed and signed by the President, though the crisis continued to spread, with the stock market proceeding to lose a quarter of its value between September 8 and October 9 (Campbell 2008: 13-14).

The origins and longer-term economic consequences of the crisis remain, and will remain, hotly contested. Its *political* consequences, however, were unambiguous. It proved to be an "exceptional event", a "game-changer" (Campbell 2008: 13, 14). Polls in late September revealed widespread and grave preoccupation amongst the electorate with the situation. In a USA Today/Gallup poll on September 24, forty percent said it was "the biggest crisis in their lifetime", while an ABC-Washington Post poll on September 29 revealed that 52 percent conceived of the country's current financial situation as a "crisis". Above all, the public blamed President Bush and the Republicans generally for the problem. The President's low approval ratings (only 33% on September 5-7) sank even further to 25% by October 3-5. For the McCain campaign, the financial crisis proved disastrous. In the period from September 14 to October 6, McCain's share in Gallup's tracking poll fell by six percentage points from 51%

to 45%, while his Real Clear Politics poll average fell by 4.4 points over the same period. For the remaining month of the 2008 campaign, the polls fluctuated somewhat, but there was no significant change thereafter in the respective standing of the two candidates: “the election had been decided” (Campbell 2008: 14).

In his thoughtful evaluation of this turn of events, Campbell (2008: 14-15) argues that the financial crisis proved, for large numbers of voters, to be the proverbial “last straw” that merited a change in political direction. Obama, who, ever since entering the Democratic primaries, had presented himself constantly as the candidate of “change”, was the beneficiary of this shift in public sentiment. Exit polls on the day of the presidential election showed that 48% of voters were “very worried” that the “economic crisis” would hurt their families; of these, almost *two thirds* (63%) had voted for Obama. In addition, the scale of the crisis had a decisive effect on elite opinion. As Davis (2009: 35-36) puts it, “at the end of the day, the Crisis itself, not the Election, did the ideological heavy lifting, sending elite opinion back in panic to the protective apron of Old Mother Keynes”.

The impact of the financial crisis on voting intentions appears, in fact, to be difficult to underestimate. A simple retrospective reading of the 2008 campaign cannot explain McCain’s lead over Obama immediately following the party conventions. With retrospective conditions so favourable to the Democrats, Obama should have been leading McCain comfortably, but he was not. The idea, therefore, that pre-election, pro-Democratic, conditions preordained Obama’s victory is therefore not consistent with the course of the campaign, described here, that led to his victory (Campbell 2008: 15). In any case, while retrospective, pre-campaign, negative evaluations of the Bush administration were important, they were nonetheless muted, as we have seen, by the open-seat nature of the contest and by entrenched political polarization, and further offset by candidate considerations that actually favoured the moderate-conservative McCain over the northern-liberal Obama (Campbell 2008: 15).

Could other factors besides the financial crisis possibly have had an equally decisive impact on the outcome of the presidential election? During the period leading up to the party conventions, and quite typically for a presidential campaign, much attention was paid to the respective nominees’ possible choice of vice-presidential running mates. Usually (but by no means always), the candidate for President, in selecting his or her running mate, seeks to

achieve a degree of “balance”, whether this is on ideological, geographical or internal party grounds, or some combination thereof. Kennedy-Johnson in 1960, Johnson-Humphrey in 1964, Carter-Mondale in 1976 and 1980, Dukakis-Bentsen in 1988 and Gore-Lieberman in 2000 are all examples of tickets which sought, to varying degrees, to balance southern, more conservative, Democrats with their more liberal northern counterparts¹³. In this context, Obama’s choice of the Delaware Senator Joseph Biden as his running mate appears less orthodox, given the latter’s generally liberal political profile. Nonetheless, Biden’s acknowledged and longstanding expertise in the field of foreign affairs appears to have been the fundamental criterion in his selection, as a means precisely of balancing Obama’s alleged shortcomings in this field. In contrast, McCain’s choice of first-term governor of Alaska Sarah Palin as his running mate was arguably the most startling and unexpected choice since Republican nominee George H. Bush’s selection of Senator Dan Quayle as his vice-presidential running mate in 1988. The choice of Palin undoubtedly had an initial, positive, impact on McCain’s campaign, by animating the Republican convention itself and energizing the Republican party base which continued to harbor serious doubts about the nature of McCain’s conservative credentials. Yet in the longer run, Palin’s very evident shortcomings, particularly with respect to her lack of grasp of both national and international affairs, may well have put off more independent and less ideological voters.

Though further research is needed, the 2008 campaign lends support to Campbell’s observation (2008: 17) that vice-presidential candidates have historically made little difference one way or the other¹⁴. In the case of the Democrats, this may well have been precisely because Biden represented a respectable and uncontroversial choice. In the case of the Republicans, polls indicated that Palin, in the end, helped McCain as much as she hurt him, thereby generating no overall net effect one way or the other. Exit polls on election day, for example, revealed that while 40% of voters claimed that the selection of Palin had been an important factor in determining their votes, these voters had split almost evenly between McCain (51%) and Obama (49%) (Campbell 2008: 17).

In similar fashion, it appears that neither the presidential nor vice-presidential debates had any significant effect on voting intentions, with no commentator able to identify the delivery of an important “knock-out” blow¹⁵ in any of them. Obama gained 2.6 percentage points and less than one percentage point in the Gallup and Real Clear Politics poll averages

respectively from before the first debate to after the third debate, thereby underscoring how most of the significant change in voting intentions had occurred before the debates as a result of the financial crisis (Campbell 2008: 16-17). McCain trailed going into the first debate and continued to do so in the wake of the final debate, demonstrating how the intervention of the financial crisis during the campaign had recast voters' retrospective evaluations far more negatively and decisively against the Republicans. The consistently poor evaluations of the Bush administration placed the Republican party in a position such that it could not have weathered the financial crisis. Such evaluations offset any advantages the party may have enjoyed with respect to social values, thereby allowing the financial crisis to make a critical difference (Campbell 2008: 15, 17).

In sum, the role of the financial crisis in the 2008 campaign described here means that the more euphoric claims regarding the nature of Obama's victory should be heavily qualified. Nonetheless, while the timing of the crisis proved catastrophic to Republican hopes, it would be wrong to therefore view Obama as something akin to an "accidental" Democratic president. For one thing, from June 2008 onwards – that is, well before the party conventions and the onset of the financial crisis – Obama outspent McCain by a tune of more than \$1 billion to \$600 million. This certainly gave Obama a significant advantage in terms of his campaign's ability to retain paid staff, buy more media time, build a presence in more states, and contact directly more voters (Campbell 2008: 16), but it is also a reflection, obviously, of the widespread support and enthusiasm that the campaign was able to generate (see Davis 2009: 9-10). For another, it is difficult to see the victory of a relatively liberal northern politician in what remains a right-of-centre nation as any kind of accident: "self-described conservatives continued to outnumber self-described liberals in the exit polls by a wide margin (34 to 22 percent). But what matters most is that this center-right electorate elected Obama and the Democrats" (Campbell 2008: 18).

In historical perspective, therefore, what was the true scale of Obama's victory, and what was the nature of both his support and that of his defeated rival?

2. THE SCALE OF OBAMA’S VICTORY

The scope of Obama’s victory in November 2008 was certainly impressive. His tally of 365 electoral college votes more than doubled the 173 gained by McCain while, as we have seen, his advantage in the popular vote of more than 8.5 million votes represented a margin of victory of 6.8 percentage points (see Table 1). Tomasky (2008: 44) concludes that “when measuring victory by some combination of electoral and popular votes [...] one must go back to 1964, when Lyndon Johnson won 61 percent of the popular vote and 486 electoral votes to Barry Goldwater’s 52, to find a more impressive Democratic win”. In 1976, Jimmy Carter had won just 297 electoral college votes, defeating incumbent President Gerald Ford by a mere 1.7 million votes out of a total of 80 million cast. Bill Clinton, meanwhile, gained higher electoral college tallies than Obama – 370 in 1992 and 379 in 1996 – but had never gained 50% of the popular vote, given the presence of Ross Perot’s third-party candidacies in both these elections.

Table 1. US Presidential Elections, 1928-2008

Year	Candidates	Party	EC vote	Popular vote
1928	Herbert Hoover Alfred E. Smith	Republican Democrat	444 87	21,392,190 15,016,443
1932	Franklin D. Roosevelt Herbert Hoover	Democrat Republican	472 59	22,821,857 15,761,841
1936	Franklin D. Roosevelt Alfred M. Landon	Democrat Republican	523 8	27,751,597 16,679,583
1940	Franklin D. Roosevelt Wendell L. Willkie	Democrat Republican	449 82	27,244,160 22,305,198
1944	Franklin D. Roosevelt Thomas E. Dewey	Democrat Republican	432 99	25,602,504 22,006,285

Year	Candidates	Party	EC vote	Popular vote
1948	Harry S. Truman Thomas E. Dewey J. Strom Thurmond	Democrat Republican States' Right Democrat	303 189 39	24,179,345 21,991,291 1,176,125
1952	Dwight D. Eisenhower Adlai E. Stevenson	Republican Democrat	442 89	33,939,234 27,314,992
1956	Dwight D. Eisenhower Adlai E. Stevenson	Republican Democrat	457 73	35,590,472 26,022,752
1960	John F. Kennedy Richard M. Nixon	Democrat Republican	303 219	34,226,731 34,108,157
1964	Lyndon B. Johnson Barry M. Goldwater	Democrat Republican	486 52	43,129,484 27,178,188
1968	Richard M. Nixon Hubert H. Humphrey George C. Wallace	Republican Democrat American Independent	301 191 46	31,785,480 31,275,166 9,906,473
1972	Richard M. Nixon George McGovern	Republican Democrat	520 17	47,169,911 29,170,383
1976	Jimmy Carter Gerald R. Ford	Democrat Republican	297 240	40,830,763 39,147,973
1980	Ronald Reagan Jimmy Carter	Republican Democrat	489 49	43,899,248 36,481,435
1984	Ronald Reagan Walter F. Mondale	Republican Democrat	525 13	54,455,075 37,577,185
1988	George H. Bush Michael S. Dukakis	Republican Democrat	426 111	48,886,097 41,809,074
1992	William J. Clinton George H. Bush	Democrat Republican	370 168	44,909,889 39,104,545

Year	Candidates	Party	EC vote	Popular vote
1996	William J. Clinton	Democrat	379	47,402,357
	Robert J. Dole	Republican	159	39,198,755
2000	George W. Bush	Republican	271	50,456,002
	Albert A. Gore	Democrat	266	50,999,897
2004	George W. Bush	Republican	286	62,028,285
	John F. Kerry	Democrat	251	59,028,109
2008	Barack Obama	Democrat	365	66,862,039
	John McCain	Republican	173	58,319,442

Note: I list only those candidates who gained EC (electoral college) votes. Source: Presidential Elections, 1789-2008 - Infoplease.com. (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781450.html>) (Accessed 8 January 2009).

Overall turnout in the election, at 61.6% of all age-eligible voters, was the highest in forty years, and marked the third consecutive increase in presidential election turnout rates since the modern low-point of 51.7% in 1996 (McDonald 2008: 1). Moreover, to the extent that it had increased, it did so mostly among African-American, Latino and young voters (Massing 2008-2009: 30), constituencies which heavily favoured Obama. As such, greater electoral participation indicated “that there was great enthusiasm for the Obama-Biden ticket and that the vaunted Obama get-out-the-vote operation, which should stand as a template for every subsequent Democratic presidential campaign, lived up to expectations” (Tomasky 2008-2009: 44). In fact, the reason that overall turnout in 2008 was not even higher was the decline, by several million, in the number of white voters, compared to 2004¹⁶. Notably, levels of electoral participation fell in several Republican states such as Utah, South Dakota and West Virginia, “suggesting less enthusiasm there for the McCain-Palin ticket than for Bush-Cheney” (Tomasky 2008-2009: 44). In contrast, in Democratic states, and in CNN’s seven designated “battleground” states (of which Obama won four), turnout in 2008 was generally higher than in 2004 (Tomasky 2008-2009: 44). This national-level dynamic was clearly evident in the case of one such battleground state, that of Ohio, which had voted Republican in 2000 and 2004, but switched to the Democrats in 2008. Here, Obama gained only approximately 45,000 more votes in Ohio than Kerry had in 2004, while McCain received approximately 275,000 fewer votes than Bush had gained in 2004 – that is, “many Republicans stayed home on election day

[..] Obama's margin of victory may have owed nearly as much to white Republican voters who failed to turn out as to black, Latino, and young voters who did" (Massing 2008-2009: 30).

This rather more tempered perspective on the nature and scope of Obama's victory is confirmed when the latter is placed in longer-term historical perspective. In their analysis of the 29 presidential elections that have taken place since 1896 (the year identified by many scholars as the starting point of "modern" US politics), Ceaser and DiSalvo (2008: 1) point out that Obama's share of the popular vote ranks fourteenth, or at the median level, while the margin of his victory over McCain, in terms of percentage points, ranks as the nineteenth largest, or slightly below the median¹⁷. In terms of the percentage of electoral college votes gained, Obama's score of 67.8% (365 out of a total of 538) ranks seventeenth among the 29 elections considered. Finally, in terms of the popular vote margin – usually the most helpful figure in determining the magnitude of presidential election victories, because it effectively controls for the effects of third-party candidacies – Ceaser and DiSalvo present five categories of results: first, near-dead heats (a margin of less than 2 percent) - for example, George W. Bush's controversial victory in 2000, when he actually lost the popular vote; second, a winning margin of between 3 and 5 percent – for example, George W. Bush's victory in 2004; third, a "moderately competitive" victory of between 6 and 9 percent; fourth, the "big wins" of between 10 and 12 percent – for example, Ronald Reagan's victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980; and fifth, the "landslide" victories of more than 13 percent – for example, Warren Harding's victory (by 26 percentage points) over James M. Cox in 1920. By this reckoning, Obama's victory fits clearly into the "moderately competitive" category, a fair reflection, as described earlier, of the way in which the 2008 campaign actually evolved and was experienced by the American electorate.

In sum, in long-term historical perspective, the rather grandiose claims made, no doubt in the heat of the moment, regarding the scale of Obama's 2008 victory, appear to be exaggerated. Instead, Ceaser and DiSalvo (2008: 1) conclude, reasonably enough, that "the 2008 Democratic triumph was no doubt impressive [...] but it was far from being massive, or even unusual, by historical standards". In similar fashion, Campbell (2008: 1) notes that "the size of the 2008 winning vote margin is solid but unremarkable, neither especially close nor particularly large when set in historical perspective".

2.1 WHO VOTED FOR OBAMA?

Nonetheless, conclusions pitched solely in terms of the numerical magnitude of Obama's victory in 2008 take us only so far. The true significance of the 2008 presidential election result lies more in the nature – and possibly the *changing* nature – of the support that the Democratic and Republican candidates respectively received. While the 2008 result still awaits rigorous academic analysis, some initial evidence indicates that certain trends underway may well have medium- and long-term implications for the nature of party competition in the USA. As Davis (2009: 11) writes, “even the most preliminary analysis of the 2008 presidential vote reveals new alliances and shifting loyalties that a deepening economic crisis may cement as a durable Democratic if not liberal majority”. Whether this amounts, though, to a “realigning election” is, as I discuss below, highly debatable.

In their bold analysis of the 2008 presidential election, Klinkner and Schaller (2008) argue that the origins of Obama's success lie in the legislative achievements of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programme of the 1960s. First, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended legal racial discrimination, helped to reduce the marginalization of African Americans within American society, enfranchised millions of African American voters, and helped create a class of African American elected officials: “without these changes, it is impossible to imagine the successful presidential campaign of Barack Obama” (2008: 1). Second, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to increased levels of immigration and, in particular, a huge increase in the proportion of the American population of Latino and Asian descent. The Hispanic proportion of the American population, for example, increased from 3.5% in 1960 to 15 percent by 2008: “one major consequence [...] has been a significant change in the racial and ethnic composition of the American electorate. In 1964 [...] non-Hispanic whites made up over 90 percent of the electorate. By 2008, that number had fallen to 75 percent” (2008: 1). Third, the Higher Education Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, both passed in 1965, contributed to a significant increase in the number of Americans with college education. In 1964, only 25 percent of voters had any college education, while those with a college degree or more accounted for only 13 percent of the electorate. In 2008, 76 percent of voters had some college education and 45 percent a college degree or more. Klinkner and Schaller (2008: 1) conclude that “Obama's election partially validated those lofty, Great Society aims because his

victory, at the very least, reflects the electoral emergence of a new majority conceived and instigated by that trio of legislative achievements”.

In fact, as these same authors describe, Obama had to build two winning majorities, or coalitions, in 2008, the first to defeat Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries, and the second to defeat John McCain in the general election. Over the past forty years, the contest for the Democratic nomination has revealed a recurring pattern, whereby an “upstart” candidate created considerable enthusiasm amongst the “upscale liberal-left wing” of the party, only to fall short in the subsequent primaries and caucuses. Thus candidates such as Eugene McCarthy (in 1968), Gary Hart (1984 and 1988), Bill Bradley (2000) and Howard Dean (2004) combined favourable media attention and significant campaign contributions with the support, notably, of younger voters and more affluent, higher educated white voters. However,

these campaigns inevitably ran aground on a traditional winning coalition forged by the nexus of working-class white voters, unionized or otherwise, and racial minorities. These voters formed the core of support for the successful nomination campaigns of Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and John Kerry (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 2).

The only candidate to win the party nomination as head of a left-liberal coalition had been George McGovern who, in 1972, had gone on to suffer a crushing defeat, by more than 20 percentage points, or nearly 18 million votes, at the hands of Richard Nixon (see Table 1). It remains, in terms of the popular vote, the heaviest presidential election defeat in US history.

It was Hillary Clinton who, from the start of the battle for the party nomination, was the clearly preferred candidate of the traditional Democratic coalition, which she supplemented with particularly strong support amongst women (especially white and Hispanic women). Given her powerful appeal among blue-collar voters – “or alternatively, the antipathy of many working-class whites to Obama” (see below) – the traditional coalition might have been sufficient to secure her the nomination. However, as a competitive African-American candidate, Obama was able to remove African-American voters from the coalition, while gaining the support of youth and of better-educated, higher-income whites. The political and demographic changes noted above have increased the size of these electoral constituencies, and also their leverage within the Democratic party, to Obama’s advantage. In general, in the Democratic primaries, while Clinton performed better among older voters, white women, Hispanics and registered Democrats, Obama performed better among African Americans,

younger voters, men, and Independents (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 2-3). That these respective configurations of support favoured Obama was demonstrated in two key primaries held on 6 May 2008, the results of which led the host of NBC's *Meet the Press* to declare the nomination contest effectively settled. In Indiana, voters aged 29 or under had favoured Obama, while 72 percent of those aged 65 or above had voted for Clinton. Those who had previously voted in a primary favoured Clinton by 55% to 45%, while those voting for the first time favoured Obama by 59% to 41%. Those without a college degree favoured Clinton by 56% to 44%, while those with a four-year degree favoured Obama by the exact same margin. Similarly, self-identified Democrats split 53% - 47% for Clinton, while Independents favoured Obama by the same margin. Above all, although only comprising 15% of Democratic primary voters in the state, 92% of African-Americans voted for Obama, enough to deprive Clinton of an overwhelming victory in Indiana (she won by only two percentage points). In North Carolina, meanwhile, 91% of African-Americans (this time comprising a third of the primary electorate) voted for Obama, propelling him to a 14-point victory over Clinton in this key southern state. In sum, "Obama's solid support among African Americans was crucial to his capture of the nomination. Their support compensated for Clinton's edge among senior citizens, whites, Hispanics, and registered Democrats" (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 3).

In the general election campaign, Obama succeeded in both increasing his margin of victory amongst his core constituencies and capturing residual support from those groups that he had lost to Clinton in the primaries. His campaign succeeded in boosting the turnout of African-American voters, which increased by 23% between 2004 and 2008. In so doing, their share of the electorate increased over the same period from 11% to 13% (McDonald 2008: 3). Obama gained 94% of the African-American vote; one in four of those who voted for Obama were African-American. Just as importantly, Obama went from losing two thirds of the Latino vote, which now comprised 9% of the total electorate, to Clinton in the primaries to winning two thirds of their support against McCain in the general election. Overall, not only did Obama increase Democratic support amongst non-white voters, but benefited from a significant increase in their turnout¹⁸. Davis (2009: 24, 26-27) argues that Latino voters were especially critical to Obama's success. While the percentage of the active electorate that was non-Hispanic white fell from 90% in 1976 to 74% in 2008, in the course of the Bush presidency, "the Latino voting-age population in Virginia increased 5 times faster than the population as a

whole, 11 times faster in Ohio, and almost 15 times faster in Pennsylvania” (2009: 24). These three key states were carried by Obama. In addition, Mexican immigrants were crucial to his victories in Colorado and Nevada, and his relatively impressive performance in Texas, while Central Americans in Virginia, and Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans in Florida, played similarly important roles. As such, “from the standpoint of a durable electoral majority, the Democrats’ most important gain in 2008 was the massive support that Obama received from the rapidly growing and much younger Latino electorate, now 12 per cent of total registrants” (2009: 26-27).

Meanwhile, Obama consolidated his support among young voters in the general election, winning 57 percent among those born since 1964 and a staggering *66 percent* of those born since 1978: “Obama’s advantage among the young was largely the result of the racial and ethnic diversity of this group. Obama actually lost whites over age 30 by a consistent 14-16 point margin, but did win whites under 30 by a ten-point margin (54-44)” (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 4). Overall, Obama’s margin of victory amongst all voters aged 18-29 (66% to 31%) improved considerably on those of his immediate Democratic predecessors, Gore in 2000 (48% to 46%), and Kerry in 2004 (54% to 45%) (Davis 2009: 25). He also consolidated his support amongst women who, in favouring him 56% to 43% in the general election, laid to rest any fears that disappointment with the defeat of Hillary Clinton (whom Democratic women had favoured in the primaries) or the presence of Sarah Palin on the Republican ticket would penalize Obama. In addition, Obama won handsomely among poorer voters, winning the support of those earning under \$50,000 per year by a 22-point margin, though this advantage was accounted for almost entirely by non-whites (86 percent to 13 percent). And he actually made gains amongst the wealthiest voters, winning amongst those earning more than \$200,000 per year by a margin of 52% to 46% (in contrast, Kerry in 2004 had lost this section of the electorate heavily, by 35% to 63%).

The broad-based nature of Obama’s support in November 2008 is also reflected in the geographical spread of the Democrats’ electoral gains when compared with 2004 (see Table 2). As we have seen, Obama not only held every state won by Kerry in 2004, but captured nine states previously won by the Republicans, including three narrow victories in three South Eastern states (Virginia¹⁹, Florida and North Carolina), three comfortable victories in three South Western states (New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado) and three mixed results in three

Midwestern states (Iowa, Ohio and Indiana). Obama turned three South Western states, other than McCain’s home state of Arizona, from “swing” to “Democrat-leaning”; solidified the Upper Midwest by turning the previously uncompetitive states of Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota and Indiana into competitive ones; and proved that so-called “New South” pockets of white voters could be combined with high numbers of African-American voters to win certain Outer-South states. As with the victories of Bill Clinton in the 1990s, Obama succeeded in building an electoral college majority outside the South. Although he carried the southern states of Florida, Virginia and North Carolina, it is worth remembering that Obama accumulated 310 electors in the North (accounting for 85% of his final total of 365 electoral college votes), totals very similar to those of Clinton in 1992 (331) and 1996 (328). In fact, Obama won in every region of the country bar the South itself, with the biggest vote increases compared to 2004 in the West (from 49.9% to 55.8%) and the Midwest (from 48.4% to 53.8%) and the smallest increases in the North East (from 55.5% to 59.0%) and the South (from 43.2% to 47.0%) (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 5-6).²⁰ (See Table 2).

Table 2. Regional Change in Democratic Vote Share, 2004-2008

Region	John F. Kerry, 2004	Barack Obama, 2008	Change, 2004-2008
Northeast	55.9%	59.0%	+ 3.5%
Midwest	48.4%	53.8%	+ 5.4%
South	43.2%	47.0%	+ 3.8%
West	49.9%	55.8%	+ 5.9%

Source: reproduced from Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 6.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Obama won a majority of Independents (52% against 44% for McCain) and even won 9% of identified Republicans. The coalition that brought him to power represented the highest national population share of any Democratic nominee since 1964, and the highest share of minority voters of any winning candidate in US history, accounting for approximately two of every five of his votes (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 4-5).

Nonetheless, given Obama's status as the first non-white President in US history, the nature and scope of the support he gained among white voters is somewhat more ambiguous. In generational terms, as we have seen, a reasonably clear picture emerged: younger white voters favoured Obama while older ones did not. In more socioeconomic terms, however, the picture is less clear. In particular, the political trajectory of the white working class has recently been hotly disputed, first with Thomas Frank's celebrated *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (Frank 2005) lamenting the capture by the Republicans of the white working class vote, and second with Bartel's (2008) study which flatly contradicts this, arguing instead for the persistence of white working class support for the Democrats. Tomasky (2008-2009: 46), reasonably enough, argues that much depends on whether the working class is defined in terms of income or level of education. And here, a clear distinction emerges in the nature of support for Obama. While the latter lost to McCain among whites earning less than \$50,000 per year by a margin of only 4 points (47% to 51%), he lost by a much greater margin (40% to 58%) amongst whites without a college education (who, incidentally, make up 39% of the US electorate).²¹

While Tomasky (2008-2009: 47) may be right in asserting that the white working class, given current demographic trends, does not, and will not, matter as much electorally as it once did²², what *is* clear is that, for the time being at least, compared to other sectors of the electorate, white support for Obama in 2008 was relatively muted, though there was notable variation both across and within regions. In the South as a whole – historically, the bastion of racial discrimination – the overall vote (i.e. white and non-white) for the Democrats did increase, as we saw in Table 2, by 3.8 percentage points between 2004 and 2008. However, in five southern states – Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee and West Virginia – Obama fared worse in 2008 than Kerry in 2004, while five southern states – Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and West Virginia - saw a *decrease* in the white Democratic vote (see Table 3). In Mississippi and Alabama, for example, Obama gained the support of only 11% and 10% respectively of white voters, thereby reflecting increased rates of racial polarization in certain parts of the deep South. As Klinkner and Schaller (2008: 7) conclude, “overall in the South, white Democratic support increased only by 1 percentage point, going from 31 percent in 2004 to 32 percent in 2008. Thus, Obama's ability to capture additional votes in the South was largely due to non-whites”.

Table 3. Change in Percentage of White Vote for Democrats in South, 2004-2008

State	2004	2008	Change, 2004-2008
Alabama	19%	10%	-9%
Arkansas	36%	30%	-6%
District of Columbia	80%	86%	+6%
Delaware	45%	53%	+8%
Florida	42%	42%	0%
Georgia	23%	23%	0%
Kentucky	35%	36%	+1%
Louisiana	24%	14%	-10%
Maryland	44%	47%	+3%
Mississippi	14%	11%	-3%
North Carolina	27%	35%	+8%
Oklahoma	29%	29%	0%
South Carolina	22%	26%	+4%
Tennessee	34%	34%	0%
Texas	25%	26%	+1%
Virginia	32%	39%	+7%
West Virginia	42%	41%	-1%
Total South	31%	32%	+1%

Source: reproduced from Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 7.

Even elsewhere, where the historical role of racial polarization is presumably less pronounced, increases in the white Democratic vote across the 2004-2008 period were still relatively modest. In the rest of the USA outside the South, the white Democratic vote increased by 3.9 percentage points, from 45.8% in 2004 to 49.7% in 2008, while nationally, as

a whole, it increased by just 2 percentage points, from 41% to 43%:

while this is the strongest Democratic performance among whites in many years, it was in the context of an unpopular war, the least popular incumbent in recent history, and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Given those circumstances, that the white vote did not improve more suggests the impact of Barack Obama's race (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 8).

In Table 4, I summarize the various voting statistics and trends described in this section.

Table 4. Summary of Trends in Democratic (D) Vote, 1964-2008 (selected years)

	1960, Kennedy	1964, Johnson	1976, Carter	2000, Gore	2004, Kerry	2008, Obama
D % of two-party vote	50.1	61.3	51.1	50.3	48.8	53.4
D % of Electoral College vote	58.0	90.3	55.3	49.5	46.7	67.8
Turnout					60.1	61.0
Non-Hispanic White % of electorate		>90.0	90.0		77.0	75.0
Hispanic % of population	3.5					15.0
Hispanic % of electorate						9.0
% Hispanics voting D						66.0
African-American % of electorate					11.0	13.0

	1960, Kennedy	1964, Johnson	1976, Carter	2000, Gore	2004, Kerry	2008, Obama
% African-Americans voting D						94.0
African-American % of D vote						25.0
Minority % of D vote						40.0
% women voting D						56.0
% Independents voting D						52.0
% voters aged 18-29 voting D				48.0	54.0	66.0
% voters aged 18-44 voting D						57.0
Margin of D victory amongst voters earning < \$50k per year						+ 22.0
% of voters earning > \$200k per year voting D					35.0	52.0
% of electorate with any college education		25.0				76.0
% electorate with college degree or more		13.0				45.0
% white voters earning < \$50k per year voting D						47.0
% white voters without any college education voting D						40.0

2.2 A REALIGNING ELECTION?

Whatever the relative limitations of the white electorate's support for Obama in 2008, the broad-based nature of his election triumph, which I have described here, was genuine enough, and was reflected not least in the profile of the large and euphoric crowds which greeted him at his victory celebration in Chicago on election night²³. When combined with the Democrats' increased majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives, many liberal commentators were quick to label 2008 as a "realigning" election. In the *Washington Post*, Harold Myers wrote that Obama's advantage "among decisive and growing constituencies make clear that this was a genuinely realigning election", while John Judis, in *The New Republic*, argued that the election was "the culmination of a Democratic realignment that began in the 1990s, was delayed by September 11, and resumed with the 2006 election"²⁴.

The concept of a "realigning" election – the usefulness of which is contested in political science – refers above all to the ushering in of a long-term reconfiguration of the balance of power and competition between (in the US context) the two major parties. Burnham (1970: 6 cited in Davis 2009: 9) defines it thus:

The critical realignment is characteristically associated with short-lived but very intense disruptions of traditional patterns of voting behaviour. Majority parties become minorities; politics which was once competitive becomes noncompetitive or, alternatively, hitherto one-party areas now become arenas of intense partisan competition; and large blocks of the active electorate – minorities, to be sure, but perhaps involving as much as a fifth to a third of the voters – shift their partisan allegiance.

The paradigmatic case in the 20th century is that of Franklin Roosevelt's landslide defeat of incumbent Republican President Herbert Hoover in 1932, amidst the onset of the Great Depression. As Table 1 shows, such was the surge in Democratic support, and the collapse in Republican support, that the 1928 and 1932 presidential elections are almost mirror images of each other. Hoover's vote fell, massively, by 26.3% from 21.4 million to 15.8 million, while the Democrats' support rose, even more dramatically, by 52%, from 15 million to 22.8 million. The massive scale of Roosevelt's victory ushered in the New Deal which proceeded to define the terms of US politics – above all with respect to the role of the federal government in the economic and social arenas - at least until the Reagan administration of the 1980s.

Clearly, Obama's victory in 2008, when compared to Democratic nominee John

Kerry's defeat in 2004, is not on the same scale as that of Roosevelt's in 1932. The vote for the Democratic candidate had increased by 13.3%, from 59 million in 2004 to 66.9 million in 2008, while the Republican vote had fallen back, by 6.0%, from 62 million to 58.3 million. Nonetheless, as Davis (2009: 9) points out,

excepting [Franklin Roosevelt's] four victories and Lyndon Johnson's annihilation of Barry Goldwater in 1964, Obama did better than any Democratic candidate since the Civil War, and his campaign met Burnham's criteria of opening enemy terrain to intense competition while galvanizing new voters and interest groups on behalf of the insurgent party.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the 2008 election revealed certain trends which, were they to become entrenched, would herald a potentially long-term partisan realignment in favour of the Democrats. At a minimum, as Tomasky (2008-2009: 44) suggests, an era of conservative dominance in American politics has ended. But more than this, Obama's almost 7 percentage point margin of victory in the first truly "open" presidential contest since 1952 (that is, with no incumbent president or vice-president running), increased congressional majorities for the Democrats, and evidence of a decline in levels of identification with the Republicans, all point to a longer-term shift in favour of the Democrats. Above all, "the coalition that helped elect Obama portends longer-term Democratic dominance, because the constituencies that comprise it are growing segments of the electorate. These constituencies are Latinos, youth, and professionals" (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 9; see also Campbell 2008: 18; Tomasky 2008-2009: 47). Thus according to exit polls, Obama won 66% of the Latino vote²⁵, which was key to winning states such as New Mexico, Colorado and Florida, and also 66% of voters aged between 18 and 29, "which some believe signals their allegiance to the Democratic party for the longer-term" (Ceaser and Di Salvo 2008: 9-10).

In addition, some trends with respect to the dynamics of electoral support for the Republican party also portend a longer-term shift that favours their opponents. For example, Brownstein (2008 cited in Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 9) has emphasized the divergence in the congressional performance of each party in the other's traditional strongholds. Thus in the 18 states that have voted Democratic in the past five presidential elections, Republicans hold just four of 36 seats in the House of Representatives, or 11 percent of the total. In contrast, though, in the 29 states which George W. Bush carried twice, Democrats hold 22 of the 58 house seats, or 40 percent. In the House of Representatives, Democrats now control almost one

third of the districts won by Bush on 2004, while Republicans control just three percent of the districts won by Kerry in 2004. As such, Brownstein concludes, “All of these trends expose the same dynamic: Democrats are effectively courting voters with diverse views, but the Republican capacity to appeal to voters beyond their party’s core coalition has collapsed”. And even worse for the Republicans, their core coalition, in contrast to that of the Democrats, appears to be static and even shrinking, based as it is around older, less educated, white voters with more conservative and traditional political values and attitudes. More than 90% of McCain’s voters were non-Hispanic whites; more than 50% were without a college degree; 54% were non-Hispanic whites aged over 45; 38% were non-Hispanic white southerners; and 42% were non-Hispanic white evangelicals (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 5). On election day, exit polls showed that 42% of voters felt that Obama was “too liberal”, and 89% of these had voted for McCain; 30% of voters felt that the presidential candidate “should share my values”, and had voted by more than two-to-one (65% versus 32%) in favour of McCain (Campbell 2008: 9). In order to prevent a longer-term electoral realignment in favour of the Democrats, therefore, the Republicans, as Tomasky (2008-2009: 47) points out, have to secure votes in expanding sectors of the electorate, presumably by moderating their views on immigration, race, and certain cultural issues. Yet in institutional terms, effecting such a strategic change may be difficult, as the party’s most loyal rank and file adherents “are its shock troops of the religious right” while the “economic royalists, to use Franklin Roosevelt’s term for the wealthy supporters of tax cuts and unregulated markets, run the party in Congress and Washington”²⁶.

Nonetheless, as Ceaser and DiSalvo (2008 10) point out, there are grounds also for caution with respect to the notion of the 2008 election result as heralding a long-term partisan realignment in the USA. As we have seen, the extreme unpopularity of incumbent President George W. Bush, and the severe financial crisis, combined to aid Obama’s campaign and undermine that of McCain. Meanwhile, a seven point margin of victory in the popular vote “was hardly a rout” and the “electoral map did not change all that decisively”²⁷. It is true that Obama scored notable victories in three states – Virginia, North Carolina and Indiana – which had not been competitive in 2000 and 2004. However, most previously competitive states in 2000 and 2004 – such as Florida, Ohio, New Hampshire and New Mexico – remained so in 2008. And while it is probably true that the Democrats in the course of 2008 became

increasingly self-confident about asserting their traditional liberal agenda, no *new* governing ideas – which would be in keeping with the idea of a realignment – emerged in the course of the campaign. Obama himself did not propose a new programmatic direction, concentrating instead on valence issues and themes such as “post-partisanship” and the need for “change”. Critically, there is no evidence of a decisive ideological shift in the US electorate’s thinking. Exit polls on election day revealed that 51% believed that government “should do more”, which represented a reversal of the majorities during the Reagan era that felt governments should do less. However, the proportion of voters describing themselves as liberal, moderate and conservative remained more or less the same as in 2004.

Again, Massing’s (2008-2009) intriguing analysis of the election campaign as it unfolded in the critical state of Ohio casts doubt, at least implicitly, on the idea of a firm and long lasting realignment in favour of the Democrats. Ohio, in fact, had enjoyed scant reward for its loyalty to George W. Bush in the 2000 and 2004 elections. In the course of his two-term presidency, Ohio lost 315,000 manufacturing jobs, its median income declined by more than 3 percent, 330,000 more people moved into poverty, and there were sharp increases in bankruptcies, foreclosures and visits to food banks. A larger proportion of Ohioans lived in poverty than at any time since Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty in the 1960s (2008-2009: 26). As such, Massing (2008-2009: 30) found that the effects of adverse economic change in this quintessential rust belt state were indeed “shattering traditional allegiances and creating an appetite for dramatic change” and, in the event, Obama did regain the state for the Democrats in 2008. Yet, as we saw earlier, his vote exceeded that of Kerry’s in 2004 by only 45,000. Furthermore, while anger and resentment at job losses and increasing poverty were genuine and widespread, an “engrained belief in self-reliance and small government remains as well. These two strains – resentment and traditionalism – seem today to coexist in uneasy and unpredictable competition” (Massing 2008-2009: 30). This hardly forms the basis, he might have added, for a stable and longstanding realignment in favour of one party over the other.

Overall, what *is* probably true is that the current economic crisis which engulfed the latter stages of the 2008 presidential campaign “has opened the door for an activist agenda far wider than anyone earlier might have imagined” (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 10). Certainly, given the Democrats’ capture of the White House, Senate and House of Representatives, the

new President, to continue with the metaphor, is unusually and favourably placed to walk through that door, should he so wish. As these same authors (2008: 7-8) point out, these three power centres usually combine to slow down domestic policymaking. The eras of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom (1912 onwards), Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (1932 onwards) and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society (1964 onwards) were exceptional. In this context, Obama has the majority in congress, and an active agenda, but lacking the size and scope of the personal victory of these three Democratic predecessors. Nonetheless, it is true that the Democrats would have to suffer a huge – and, at this moment, unlikely – reversal in 2010 to lose their majorities in either the Senate or the House. As such, he is currently presiding over Democratic majorities large enough to “sustain some losses and still be workable governing entities” (2008: 8).

Consideration of the experience and performance of the first months of the Obama Presidency is beyond the scope of this paper; however, there were early and strong indications – above all with respect to the new President's measures and proposals to solve the current economic and financial crisis – that he intends to use to the full the very considerable political resources that comfortable Democratic majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives have afforded him. But only if he actually *succeeds* will claims regarding a long-term realignment of US party politics, as a result of his victory in 2008, gain real credibility. As Tomasky (2008-2009: 44) notes,

the question now is whether Obama and Congress can deliver both economic progress and greater equality by following through on his major campaign promises – tax increases for the wealthy; tax cuts for the middle class; protections for homeowners; a bold stimulus package that includes broad public investment; and a health-care plan that reduces risk and out-of-pocket expenses for average Americans. If they can do so, then the chances of this realignment becoming a hard one in four years' time will increase dramatically.

3. CONCLUSIONS: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

A headline in the *New York Times* on 6 November 2008 proclaimed that “With Victory in Hand, Obama Aides Say Task Now Is to Temper High Expectations”. The paper went on to report that “the exuberance of Tuesday night's victories was also tempered by unease over the public's high expectations for a party in control of both Congress and the White House amid

economic turmoil, two wars overseas and a yawning budget gap” (cited in Didion 2008-2009: 18). Such high expectations, however, were not just restricted to the economic sphere, but extended to the possible implications of his election as the first African-American President.

In this sense, the symbolism of his victory in November 2008 is difficult to overestimate. After all, Obama was born (in 1961) when the civil rights movement was still waging its often deadly struggle, in the deep South and elsewhere, against legal and informal means of racial discrimination, when millions of African-Americans were denied the suffrage, and before the swathe of legislation in the field of civil rights was passed in the mid-1960s. As such, Darryl Pinckney (2008-2009: 18) offers the following poignant appraisal of Obama’s victory: “I [...] can’t quite believe that Barack Obama’s time has come [...] and while I am not saying that racism in America has come to an end, certainly white supremacy and the lawlessness associated with it have been repudiated; they have been made to depart from power”. Such thoughts were undoubtedly shared by the many distinguished former leaders of the civil rights movement who attended Obama’s election night victory celebration in Chicago.

Yet Pinckney’s words are also sobering, in reminding the reader that the problems of racism, and the entrenched, centuries-old, discrimination suffered by the African-American population in the political and socioeconomic spheres²⁸, are hardly likely to disappear overnight simply because Obama has been elected to the White House. The rapport and empathy that Obama developed between himself and the African-American population in the course of the primary and general election campaigns is beyond doubt, as Mark Danner (2008) describes beautifully in an account of an Obama rally in mid-October 2008 in front of a largely African-American audience in Germantown, Northwest Philadelphia. Yet as Wellington (2008: 27) argues (and writing, incidentally, before Obama’s victory in November 2008), the potentially *radical* implications for African-Americans of the new President’s racial background need to be placed in sharp perspective. Wellington notes that Obama, in the course of the primary campaign, had cast himself as both “black” and “postracial”, in the sense of being a black candidate looking forward to a postracial future. In this sense, Obama had “transcended” race by attracting large numbers of white voters, though his ability to attract white *working class* voters remained, as we have seen, more problematic²⁹.

Yet in terms of his support amongst the African-American population itself, it had not always been so clear that he would go on to dominate it. Polls throughout 2007 indicated that African-Americans were divided between Obama and Hillary Clinton. The latter won the endorsement of former leading members of the civil rights movement, such as former Mayor of Atlanta Andrew Young and Congressman John Lewis. Moreover, Jesse Jackson, the only African-American prior to Obama to launch credible bids for the Presidency (in 1984 and, above all, 1988), in a critique of the Democratic candidates' platforms, argued that John Edwards' strong antipoverty agenda was closest to the spirit of Martin Luther King:

Democratic candidates are talking about healthcare and raising the minimum wage, but [other than Edwards] they aren't talking about the separate and stark realities facing African Americans. African Americans have about half the average household income and less than half the household wealth. We're suffering twice the level of unemployment and twice the level of infant mortality (quoted in Wellington 2008: 28)³⁰.

African-American philosopher Cornel West also declared that "I'm in Obama's camp, but I think he's got to be more bold. I think he's got to be more courageous in terms of highlighting issues of the poor, issues of working people, the legacies of white supremacy that are still very real" (Wellington 2008: 28).

In the event, as I have described here, Obama's support amongst African-Americans was overwhelming. Nonetheless, the absence of an emphatic anti-poverty platform remained a key distinction between Obama's constant message of "change" and the more radical language associated with black protest movements, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the previous presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson. The latter, as Wellington (2008: 29) notes, have tended to be labeled (including, implicitly, by the Obama campaign itself) as "symbolic", yet "they were arguably no more, no less, symbolic than Obama's 2008 campaign". In 1988 Jackson won primaries in 11 states and his platform, undoubtedly shaped as a response to the harsh Reaganite politics of the times, was substantively bold:

his extremely liberal (sometimes radical) platform included slavery reparations, ratification of a feminist-supported Equal Rights Amendment, and a prohibition against nuclear first strikes; his campaign foreshadowed what has become a major Democratic issue; Jackson offered a universal health care plan (Wellington 2008: 29).

In contrast though, the Obama campaign, though within (much like Jackson) the oracular traditions of the black church, “eschewed a heavily ideological “protest” tone” (Wellington 2008: 29). Instead, the tone of his campaign was considerably more vague, with its constant references to the “racial politics of the past” and to the need for both “change” and “unity”. Wellington (2008: 30) acknowledges the “intensely powerful symbolism of unity – particularly powerful when promoted by a black candidate”, but points out that his simultaneous calls for change and unity often jarred with each other. Moreover, more radical critics of Obama’s campaign were concerned that the absence of a more concretely defined progressive platform threatened to muddy “the real meaning of progressive politics. The prospect of the election of a black messenger of “change”, pushing a tepidly reformist social agenda, threatens to supplant grassroots solidarity movements and hopelessly confuse the debate over class, race, and poverty” (Wellington 2008:31).

In this context, it is perhaps as well to remember that since assuming office, “Obama has generously opened the White House doors to Clintonites and Republicans, reinforcing his image as a pragmatic centrist focused on competent government and national unity” (Davis 2009: 8). Yet be that as it may, the broad-based and enthusiastic support that Obama generated in his successful bid for the Presidency was, as I have described in the paper, a remarkable development, especially given the deeply conservative instincts of large sections of the American electorate. The election for the first time of an African-American President represents a massive, progressive, step forward in the USA’s troubled history of race relations. Yet continuing real progress in race relations will come in the form of the concrete consequences for the African-American population of the policies adopted by the new President, and the extent to which – assuming he runs for reelection in 2012 - Obama himself is judged in terms of what he has achieved in office rather than in terms of his racial background.

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NOTES:

¹ *Time* magazine, Vol. 172, No. 24, November 24, 2008, and Ryan Lizza, "How Obama Won", *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2008; both cited in Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 1.

² Of these nine states, all but Iowa and New Mexico had voted Republican in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

³ In the 2006 mid-term elections, Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives, thereby ending 12 years of Republican rule.

⁴ In 2000, the Republicans gained the White House, controversially, despite losing the popular vote, and managed only a tie in the Senate, albeit retaining control via the vote of the Vice-President (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 5-6).

⁵ Cited in Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 11.

⁶ This "surge" for the Democrats in the consecutive elections of 2006 and 2008 – that is, gains in both elections – was very notable, approximately the fifth largest ever, and roughly equivalent to the gains made by the Republicans with Reagan's landslide presidential victory in 1980. It is still eclipsed, though, by the gains made by the Democrats with the victories of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936 and those made by the Republicans with the victory of Warren Harding in 1920 (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 6).

⁷ The Democrats' victory in 2008 was, since 1896, the 6th largest in the Senate and the 10th largest in the House

of Representatives (Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 4).

⁸ This section draws very heavily on Campbell (2008).

⁹ Near dead-heats are defined as those elections in which the winning candidate receives 51.5% or less of the two-party vote; competitive elections are those in which the winner receives between 51.6% and 57.0% of the two-party vote, and landslides are those in which the winner receives 57.1% or more of the two-party vote (Campbell 2008: 3-4)

¹⁰ Among the 21% of voters who “somewhat disapproved” of Bush’s performance, McCain actually beat Obama by a margin of 65% to 31% (Campbell 2008: 6).

¹¹ Of voting Democrats who had supported Clinton in the primaries, 83% reported voting for Obama over McCain (Campbell 2008: 7 n 12).

¹² For a brilliant analysis of the 1948 presidential campaign, see Karabell (2000).

¹³ This is not to imply that a presumably “unbalanced” ticket is doomed to failure. In 1984, Walter Mondale’s choice of a fellow northern liberal, Geraldine Ferraro, as his running mate, certainly proved disastrous, yet Bill Clinton’s choice of Al Gore, a fellow centrist southern Democrat, proved to be astute in countering the Republican challenges of, respectively, George Bush in 1992 and Robert Dole in 1996.

¹⁴ No doubt there are exceptions. Kennedy’s selection of Lyndon Johnson in 1960 proved critical to his ability, as a northern, Catholic, liberal to win votes in the South.

¹⁵ Debates have occasionally produced such incidents, either in the form of an explicit blunder (such as incumbent President Gerald Ford’s claim in his 1976 debate with Jimmy Carter that there was “no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe”) or an effective put-down (such as Senator Lloyd Bentsen’s remark, in the face of the pretensions of his rival for Vice-President in 1988, Dan Quayle, that the latter was “no Jack Kennedy”). Nonetheless, the impact of such incidents on voting decisions is difficult to assess.

¹⁶ Though Davis (2009: 26) argues that nationally, whites cast “700,000 fewer votes than in 2004”, while African-Americans cast “almost three million more”.

¹⁷ Campbell (2008: 1), using a slightly longer historical framework – the thirty-six presidential elections held since the Civil War – reaches broadly similar conclusions, finding that the margin of Obama’s popular vote victory ranks seventeenth (sixteen margins were smaller and nineteen larger).

¹⁸ In 2004, non-Hispanic White voters had made up 77 percent of the electorate; this had declined to 74% by 2008. In absolute terms, their numbers had increased by just 1 percent, from 94.2 million to 95.1 million. In contrast, the number of voters outside this category had increased from 28.1 million to 33.4 million, an increase of 18.9 percent. Overall, these latter voters accounted for 84 percent of the increase in turnout between 2004 and 2008 (Klinkner and Schaller 2008: 4).

¹⁹ For an illuminating account of the nature of Obama’s victory in Virginia, see Davis (2009). Here, and also in North Carolina, African-Americans, white professionals, immigrants and college students were critical to Obama’s success (2009: 14).

²⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the regional dynamics of the 2008 election result, see Davis 2009: 12-18.

²¹ Though again the age factor seems to retain an effect. Davis (2009: 25), for example, asserts that “compared to the Kerry vote in 2004, Obama’s support in the young white working class increased 30 points amongst women, 14 points amongst men”.

²² The white proportion of the American population, currently standing at approximately 68%, is forecast to decline to 61% by 2020 and 50% by 2050 (Tomasky 2008-2009: 47).

²³ While such evidence is anecdotal and impressionistic, the contrast between the crowds that listened to Obama’s victory speech in Chicago and McCain’s concession speech in Phoenix could not have been more telling. The former included young, old, white and minority voters; the latter was made up overwhelmingly of

ageing white voters.

²⁴ Harold Myerson, "A Real Realignment", *Washington Post*, 7 November 2008; John Judis, "America the Liberal", *The New Republic*, 5 November 2008; both cited in Ceaser and DiSalvo 2008: 8-9.

²⁵ Klinkner and Schaller (2008: 4) argue that McCain's change of position with respect to his support for a moderate immigration reform bill (see also Davis 2009: 29), in order to capture the Republican nomination, and also some of the more scurrilous Republican attacks on Obama as being somehow un-American because of his racial background and as the child of an immigrant, "may have backfired with Latino voters, many of whom have faced similar prejudices". On anti-immigrant sentiment within the Republican Party, see also Davis 2009: 28.

²⁶ It is worth remembering that those Republicans who actually survived the party's electoral debacle of 1932 were amongst its most conservative, and proved to be resolute and uncompromising in their opposition to Roosevelt's New Deal policies. I am grateful to Luis Fernando Medina for pointing this out to me.

²⁷ Ceaser and DiSalvo (2008: 10) also cite Obama's "massive advantage in campaign funds" as a reason to exert caution. However, such an advantage was the product, undoubtedly, of the widespread enthusiasm and support that his campaign generated, a factor more in keeping with arguments favouring the possibility of partisan 28 Recent notable additions to the vast literature on this subject include those of Western (2006, 2002), Western and Pettit (2005), and Patillo, Weiman and Western (eds.) (2004).

²⁹ Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that both Bill Clinton and John Kerry had encountered similar problems (Wellington 2008: 27).

³⁰ Davis (2009: 34-35) also argues that Edwards's platform was much more radical and progressive than those of both Obama and Hillary Clinton.

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