

Can the World Position Itself for the Next President Before the Actual Election?

Written by Joshua Putnam

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JOSHUA PUTNAM, JUL 14 2008

For the first time since 1952, America and the world will be getting something different out of the US presidential election of 2008. Neither an incumbent president nor a vice president of the incumbent's party is running for the White House for the first time since the period following the Second World War. Without either in the running there is no direct way for voters within the American electorate to punish or reward the actions of the incumbent administration. With those fetters removed, comes the notion that the 2008 election and its outcome together represent something of an unknown quantity to the not only the American electorate, but to the rest of the world as well. And while people around the world do not have the right to vote in the election, they, and the nations where they are citizens, do have a stake in the outcome. Given that stake, though, do states across the globe attempt to gauge the the likelihood of one candidate or party succeeding and, in turn, position themselves for a new regime?

Typically, an early reading of the tea leaves provides a glimpse into which party will have an advantage in the coming presidential election even before the two major parties' nominees are settled upon. Is there an incumbent running? How well is the American economy doing? How popular is the current president? However, given the fact that a similar electoral scenario has not presented itself for over half a century, the direct connection to the ruling administration is missing. Still, even with neither George W. Bush nor Dick Cheney on the ballot in November, the Republican Party is expected to suffer some punishment for Bush's nearly historically low approval ratings. It was that environment that gave rise to a field of prospective Republican presidential candidates lower in quality than in past cycles. Once John McCain overcame the hurdles of the organizational and fund-raising phase of the contest and then the early primary and caucus contests to emerge as the presumptive nominee, he presented, on some levels, a departure from the current administration. The Arizona senator's status as a maverick willing to break with his own party on some issues meshes well with the pivotal group of so-called swing voters occupying the center of the ideological spectrum within the American electorate. In many ways then, McCain is the ideal candidate for the Republican Party in such a hostile electoral situation.

As a result, the Republican Party, on the one hand, is ill-equipped to compete in this election given Bush's approval rating. But the party's stock improved with the selection of a candidate not necessarily as closely tied to the Bush White House and its policies as some of his opponents in the race for the Republican nomination. The forces at odds on the Republican side can be contrasted with a differing set of forces on the Democratic side. With a floundering economy and an unpopular president, the Democratic Party is viewed as the party to beat in the 2008 election. That advantage is/was mitigated by the historic candidacies of the party's two front-running candidates for the Democratic nomination. The race and gender issues surrounding Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, respectively, and the viability of each as candidates, offered unknowns not before confronted within American presidential politics.

That, then, was the decision set facing the American electorate from early March onward into June when Obama clinched the Democratic nomination. But that trio also provided international actors with an array of policy positions directly relevant on the world stage. However, the unprecedented nature of the nomination campaign made the international community's—not to mention the American press and pundits—ability to assess the playing field that much more difficult. Indeed, the nature of the 2008 cycle has been so volatile that positioning for the next administration has proven to be an exercise in determining which unknown quantity will do what once the next

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president is sworn into office in January 2009. Much of that has to do with the electoral situation the US finds itself in for the first time in nearly two generations. Under the circumstances that have marked the presidential elections of the interim, either an incumbent president would be running for re-election or his vice president would be seeking to succeed him.

Every election was a decision between the status quo and some form of change. The international community can prepare for a continuation of policies if the incumbent holds an advantage in the leading indicators of presidential election success discussed above. And it can just as easily position itself, in whole or in part, for a change if the challenger candidate is in a stronger position vis a vis an imperiled incumbent. Making the call on which of the two versions of change represented in this election to prepare for, though, is a completely different enterprise. According to a recent Pew Global Attitudes Project survey in 24 nations, those outside the US have an opinion on which candidate they think will do a better job in terms of US foreign policy. In all but one of the nations polled (Jordan), Obama performed better than McCain on that specific question. The Illinois senator far outpaced McCain most notably in the countries within Europe while holding significant, yet smaller, margins in other regions.

That is at the mass level though. Are matters any different at the level of government? It is difficult to tease this out, but the world is already on hold anticipating the Bush's replacement, whomever he may be. This was underscored by Bush's recent trip to Europe and during the recent G-8 meetings in Japan. Little emerged from either because Bush's power internationally is (and has been) in decline. However, is that a function of him being on his way out, the knowledge that some form of change is on the way, or a combination of the two? Most likely, it is a combination. Regardless though, the world has already begun preparing for life after Bush. Now, it is simply a matter of waiting to see to what extent US foreign policy will change.

Joshua T. Putnam is a doctoral candidate studying American government in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia. He is currently writing a dissertation exploring the motivation of and conditions under which American states shift their presidential nominating contests—primaries and caucuses—to earlier dates in order to increase their influence on the process. In addition, he maintains and moderates the political blog, *Frontloading HQ* (<http://frontloading.blogspot.com/>).