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B.I.L. U.S. Election Debate

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U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2008

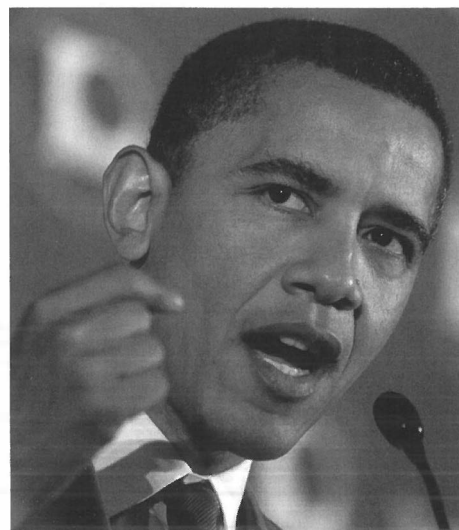
By Drew Mann

Political and Economic Counselor of the US Embassy

After almost two years, the long campaign for the U.S. presidency is over. On November 4, about 127 million Americans cast their votes for president (59.5% of eligible voters – the highest level of voter participation since the 1960's). Although there were multiple candidates on many ballots (for example, Ralph Nader ran as an independent candidate; Cynthia McKinney ran on the Green Party platform; and Bob Barr was the Libertarian Party candidate), the real contest was between Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, the Democratic candidate, and Senator John McCain of Arizona, the Republican (or GOP – Grand Old Party) candidate.

“He fashioned his victory with strong support among young, minority and well-to-do voters.”

This was the 56th time the U.S. had held its presidential election and was the first election since 1952 in which neither a sitting president nor vice president was running. This situation attracted a large number of candidates from the start - 7 for the Democratic nomination and 9 for the Republican. There was an unprecedented amount of interest and enthusiasm this election cycle – more people got involved in primaries and caucuses than ever before. For example, in 2004, 122,000 Democrats participated in their party caucus in Iowa; 236,000 did in 2008. In 2004, 236,000 people voted in the Georgia primary; over 2 million voted in 2008. More people contributed money than before. The candidates raised more than \$1 billion to get their messages across, connect with voters and build organizations to mobilize voters.



In fact, this was probably the first election in which the internet played a significant role. More than any other candidate, Senator Obama harnessed the internet to encourage people to contribute money and to remain engaged with his campaign. Voters could log onto any candidate's website to get information about particular issues. We also witnessed an enlarged role for political satire this election with candidates appearing on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, the Colbert Report and Saturday Night Live among other network shows.

After the nominating conventions in late summer, the race between Senators Obama and McCain was close. In mid-September, however, the looming financial crisis made the economy the predominant issue/concern of the election and voters, by a narrow margin, started to prefer Senator Obama (as measured by opinion polls). On election day, Senator Obama was elected, receiving 52.7% of the vote (and 365 electoral votes, projected – the State of Missouri still has not been declared for either candidate although Senator McCain is leading in the vote count) to Senator McCain's 46% (and 162 electoral votes, projected). Sixty-two percent of voters said the economy was their top concern.

Senator Obama, one of the youngest men to be elected president, becomes the first Democratic nominee to receive more than 50% of the vote since Governor Jimmy Carter ran and won in 1976. He fashioned his victory with strong support among young, minority and well-to-do voters.

Among other issues, President-elect Obama campaigned on bringing U.S. troops home from Iraq, providing increased personnel and resources for Afghanistan (with a greater contribution from U.S. allies), closing the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and enacting a cap-and-trade program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Other than exchanges about Iraq and Afghanistan, foreign policy was not discussed frequently during the campaign. Nonetheless, much of U.S. foreign policy will likely remain the same – continued strong support for Israel; commitment to the transatlantic relationship; engagement with emerging powers such as Russia, India and China; and commitment to pursue nuclear non-proliferation vigorously.

B.I.L. U.S. Election Debate

By Lisa Blanken

It is the 3rd of November in Leiden, one day before the elections in the United States. There is no coming around it any more; no paper, news channel or radio station around the world isn't talking about the possible outcome of the elections. The B.I.L. can't stay behind and has organized an event to discuss the two candidates and their possible foreign policy. Petra Stienen (Deputy Head North American Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Drew Mann (Political and Economic Counselor of the US Embassy) are joining us in this debate, to give both their opinions and to answer the questions of the students.

At 15:30 hrs is the lecture room quite full and after a “Leidsch Kwartiertje” everybody is seated to get started. To begin the two guests are introduced by the commissioner of Foreign Affairs. From which Harmen Bredeveld, the debate president, takes over, starting with a short look to the latest polls. The distance between Obama and McCain was large, but still possible to overcome. Our debate is still heading to a comparison of two possible presidents!

To get into the election mood everybody had a laugh with a short film called “Time for some Campaigning”. A very fun and short summary of the election period, with all the clichés and flaws of both candidates. After that the students could make their vote, because of this we could easily find the one, very proud, McCain supporter and quite a few indecisive voters. This led to a discussion about the elections itself and the choices the two candidates made during their campaign. “Why did McCain choose Palin as a vice-president?” and “Is Obama up for the job?” where questions easily made. We only missed a comment about Joe the Plumber. What was his role in the Campaign?

Most questions were answered and we really had to get to our main subject of the debate. We always heard what McCain or Obama will mean for the American people or their thoughts about the Iraq policy but we hardly heard something about the influence on Europe, the Netherlands and the rest of the world. Luckily both Obama and McCain would like to invest more in their foreign relations. There have hardly been two candidates with such an international view. Barack Hoessein Obama with a very international background has even lived in the Muslim country Indonesia and McCain is a true war hero who always understood the importance of allays and friendships outside the United States.

The debate about the foreign policy contained many questions about Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of this we headed to the next subject; the wars in those countries.

Both Petra Stienen and Drew Mann know more about this subject. Petra Stienen studied Arabic Languages and has been a diplomat in the Middle East for quite a while. Whereas Drew Mann spent two years in Afghanistan, working in provincial reconstructions. Also three international students from Afghanistan could contribute to this debate.

“After a “Leidsch Kwartiertje” everybody is seated to get started.”

All this led to a discussion about leaving, staying and if there should be more or less soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The only conclusion that was made was that the new president cannot change too much concerning the war. With a last check if people had changed their opinion about their vote, we ended the debate. All students had the opportunity to have a drink at the café downstairs and talk informally with Drew Mann. Now fully prepared for the coming days!



Drew Mann and Petra Stienen