

Hopes and illusions dominate European reaction to Obama victory

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Never has the election of an American president been followed so closely and with such anticipation on this side of the Atlantic as in the recent contest between Barack Obama and John McCain. Germany's two main public television stations, the ARD and ZDF, set up studios in Washington and reported non-stop on the election into the early morning hours on Wednesday.

Dozens of reporters broadcast live interviews with voters standing in long lines at US polling stations. Many German moderators and commentators made no secret of their support for Obama. Amongst the guests in the ARD studio in New York was the former German interior minister, Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who proudly sported his Obama campaign button before the cameras.

German President Horst Köhler (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) sent a telegram of congratulations to Obama on the night of his victory, stressing the close links between Germany and the United States. In coming to grips with challenges he will face, Köhler wrote that Obama could count on Germany, "as a reliable partner and a friend of many years." The federal president spoke of a new initiative for "cooperative world politics."

German-America election night parties were held in restaurants, hotels and cultural facilities in many German cities. The invitation to one such gathering in Hamburg read: "The party begins at 22:00 and goes on until Obama wins."

Reporting on this event, *Der Spiegel* writes: "At the bar, expressions of enthusiasm were mixed with bitterness—many guests are sunk in quiet discussions, instead of continuous rejoicing—there are solemn faces. The home of the proud and the brave is ashamed of itself. 'What sort of a country is it where more than 40 million Americans cannot afford decent health insurance?' asks Sarah from New York. The blond student loses the smile

with which she had previously greeted bar visitors: 'Today we are known around the world as warmongers, as polluters; when it comes down to it we are just a big joke,' grumbles the 22-year-old. Two wars took place because of the Americans, a world out of balance due to a single nation..."

"America is freed from a burden," was the message from the foreign editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. But such enthusiasm was not limited to the US.

There is an audible sigh of relief throughout Europe, *Die Zeit* noted, adding: "Perhaps it is only relief that the deadening period of the Bush years is over." The paper, which is close to the SPD, declaring that there had never been a US president who had done so much damage to the reputation and image of America as George W. Bush.

Die Zeit continued: "Never has America lost so much power within the period of a two terms in office. A war of aggression at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, a halt to disarmament, a blockade to climate improvement, a record deficit, New Orleans, bribery scandals, economic crisis—who cannot excuse the Americans for seeking change?"

The column noted that voters did not think that Bush's man was capable of carrying through the reforms the country needs: "Barack Obama was able to turn the election into a referendum on George Bush's policies. Time and time again McCain stressed that the current president was not on the ballot. But it did not help: Obama was able to present McCain's candidacy as George Bush's ominous third term in office."

In France, enthusiasm was not limited to the Americans living there. According to *Spiegel Online*, Obama's victory led to "veritable outbursts of enthusiasm" in the Latin Quarter of Paris, where many students live. French newspapers outdid themselves with gushing superlatives: *Libération* described the election as an "ideological decision" for "another America"; *Le Monde* praised the

"great victory", *Le Figaro* celebrated an "historic election."

President Nicolas Sarkozy praised the "brilliant success" of Obama and sent his congratulations "on behalf of all Frenchmen." Sarkozy declared that during his own election campaign he had met with Obama in the US in 2006 and added, "I never believed in the success of Hillary Clinton."

Alongside evident relief over the end of the Bush era, many press comments are characterized by big illusions in an Obama administration. Under the heading "The Resurrection of the American Dream," *Spiegel Online* writes:

"Obama is America's offer of reconciliation after all those years of premeditated political provocation, of military action not backed by international law, of America's claim to be entitled to military pre-emptive strikes. The Bush doctrine was scrapped last night. The unilateralist stance of the Western superpower is likely to be over for now."

It will not be long, however, before such hopes and illusions collide with reality. In his speech in Berlin last summer, Obama had already made clear that he expected Europeans to jettison their "pacifist inhibitions" and be prepared to intervene much more vigorously alongside the US in Afghanistan and other wars.

Stock market reaction to Tuesday's election result was muted. The German share index (DAX) opened on Wednesday with clear losses that were only partially recovered in the course of the day. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* cited one stock market dealer who noted Obama's lack of economic expertise: "The financial crisis has not gone away just because of his election victory."

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown was enthusiastic in his greetings to Obama. "I know Barack Obama and we share many values," he wrote in an e-mailed message. "We both have determination to show that government can act to help people fairly through these difficult times facing the global economy,"

Across the floor of the House of Commons, the Conservative opposition leader David Cameron enthused: "America has made history and proved to the world that it is a nation eager for change. In these difficult times people everywhere are crying out for change. Barack Obama is the first of a new generation of leaders who will deliver it."

Britain's political elite is happy with the result for two main reasons. Firstly, there is the hope on all sides that

Obama will help restore the battered reputation of the United States internationally—a central issue for a country that is so dependent on its alliance with Washington. Cameron stressed this point when he declared that "Barack Obama's victory will give people a new opportunity to look at the United States and see her for what I believe she is—a beacon of opportunity, freedom and democracy."

Secondly, there is the hope that Obama will extricate the UK from the foreign policy debacle in Iraq that has been the price paid for the "special relationship" between the two countries, and instead shift military focus to Afghanistan where Britain is heavily committed.

By associating itself with the man who, in turn, is associated with "change," the Labour Party leadership also wishes to distance the Brown government from its deeply unpopular image as an ally of big business and the neo-conservatives. "The relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is vital to our prosperity and security," insisted Brown. "Barack Obama ran an inspirational campaign, energising politics with his progressive values and his vision for the future."

There is an important difference between the enthusiasm shown by broad layers of the population for Obama's victory and the reactions of European governments. For many people the change in the White House is seen as an end to a government they despised and which shocked and angered the world with its arrogance and military aggression. The ruling elite in Europe, however, pursue different goals.

They hope that closer cooperation with the new US administration will help justify European intervention in the war in Afghanistan and a possible military on assault against Iran, while at the same time overcoming the widespread opposition to militarism within the European population.



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