

The election of Barack Obama

5 November 2008

Democratic candidate Barack Obama won an overwhelming victory over Republican John McCain in the US presidential election Tuesday, and the Democrats significantly increased their majorities in both the House of Representatives and the US Senate.

As of midnight, Obama was projected to win 338 electoral votes compared to 156 for McCain, with five states still too close to call. A total of 270 electoral votes is required for victory. The Democrats had gained at least five seats in the Senate and nearly 20 seats in the House, with the outcome of many contests still undetermined.

Obama carried 26 states: all 19 won by the 2004 Democratic candidate John Kerry and seven states won by Bush in that election--Virginia, Florida, Ohio, Iowa, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada. He was leading in three more states won by Bush in 2004--Indiana, North Carolina and Montana.

Obama's national margin in the popular vote will approach ten million. He has won by the largest margin for a non-incumbent candidate for president since Eisenhower in 1952.

First and foremost, the election outcome is a massive repudiation of the Bush presidency, the Republican Party and nearly three decades of right-wing domination of American politics. It is a watershed election, one which reflects, in the electoral framework, the massive demographic, socio-economic and cultural shifts over the past quarter-century.

All of the right-wing nostrums reiterated by the media and political establishment of both parties in recent years—that America is a "right" or "center-right" nation with a majority of "red states" unshakably loyal to the Republicans, that religion and cultural "values" are the decisive political issues—have been shattered.

More significantly, the election's outcome has disproved the claim that the United States is a racist nation, and that irrational racial animosities trump all other issues. According to exit polls, only a very small

percentage of voters stated that the issue of race exerted any influence on their vote. Instead, under the impact of war, financial crisis and deepening recession, tens of millions, in a completely rational manner, voted to express their democratic and essentially egalitarian aspirations—although, given the distorted and limiting framework of official politics, the only outlet for their sentiments was a vote for the Democrats.

Polls also show that two-thirds of the immense youth vote went to Obama.

The result is shipwreck for the Republican Party, with its presidential base reduced to a regional rump, consisting of the Deep South and the largely rural states of the interior West. Obama swept the East Coast from Maine down to Florida, the industrial Midwest, the entire Pacific Coast and much of the Mountain West.

The Republicans lost Senate seats in every region of the country. Democrats captured vacant seats in Virginia, Colorado and New Mexico and defeated incumbent Republicans in New Hampshire and North Carolina, with seats in Oregon, Alaska and Minnesota still undetermined. Not a single incumbent Democratic senator was defeated.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats captured three Republican-held seats in New York, three in Virginia, two in Ohio, two in Florida, two in New Mexico, and one each in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Alabama, Illinois, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and Idaho. Only three Democratic incumbents were defeated, in Florida, Louisiana and Texas.

Millions of people in America and billions around the world are greeting the sweeping Republican defeat with a sense of relief and even exhilaration. However, their interpretation of the Obama victory is very different from that of the Democratic Party leadership, including Obama himself, and the ruling class constituency that backed the Illinois senator.

The US media will doubtless say that the Democratic victory is not a mandate for a radical change of course.

Already, even before the votes were counted and Obama's victory was officially acknowledged, leading Democrats were putting forward precisely this position. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who threw his support to Obama during the Democratic primary contest, cautioned Tuesday night that the Democrats should "be modest" and "seek alliances." Georgia Congressman John Lewis echoed these remarks, saying the Democrats had to "go slowly" and pursue a "bipartisan" course.

In fact, Tuesday's election was a clear popular mandate for a reversal of right-wing policies that have largely been of a bipartisan character.

Whatever satisfaction the Democratic Party draws from its victory is tempered by the realization within President-elect Obama's inner circle, the party leadership and the political establishment that the mass expectations and hopes aroused by the election will not be easily contained. The outcome of the election sets the stage for a new and protracted period of intense class conflict in the United States.

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