Barack Obama's America

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ELECTION NIGHT 2008. At 11:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, the television networks universally declared that Barack Hussein Obama had acquired more than the 270 electoral votes necessary to become the 44th president of the United States. Obama had won 52.63 percent of the popular vote, the first Democrat to win a majority since Jimmy Carter’s minimalist 50.08 percent victory over Gerald R. Ford in 1976.1 And unlike 2000, when George W. Bush lost the popular vote but beat Al Gore by four votes in the Electoral College, this time the electors reflected Obama’s strong popular showing: 365 electoral votes for Obama to 173 for John McCain.2 The red state–blue state stasis that bedeviled the country during the George W. Bush years was finally broken, as former red states that had twice backed Bush—Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio, Florida, Indiana, Colorado, and Nevada—switched to Obama.3 In the immediate aftermath of Obama’s victory, MSNBC host David Gregory marveled, “The son of an African father, a Kenyan, and a white mother from Kansas, in a country that was stained by slavery, is now President of the United States. The ultimate color line has been crossed.”4

Voters in 2008 clearly were searching for someone very different from the president they had come to know (and dislike). The editors of The New Republic captured this prevailing sentiment when they implicitly observed
that Obama had become the antithesis of the incumbent he sought to replace: “On the whole, he has turned in one of the most impressive performances in recent political history—demonstrating an ability to explain complex ideas in plainspoken English, impeccable managerial skills, evenness of temper, avoidance of sloppy errors, and pragmatism, not to mention that he can really deliver a speech.” Most Americans agreed, and they largely set aside the cultural and values differences that created the partisan paralysis that had begun a decade earlier with Bill Clinton’s impeachment.

“Party Like It’s 1964”

The un-Bush-like qualities discerned by voters (and The New Republic) in Obama prompted most Democrats to rhapsodize about the new president. Introducing Obama to adoring audiences, talk show host Oprah Winfrey recalled reading The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, which describes how the enslaved Pittman searched for “the one” who would lead her to freedom. Winfrey told rapt audiences that she had discovered “the one” in Obama: “Well, I believe, in ’08, I have found the answer to Ms. Pittman’s question. I have fo-o-u-und the answer! It is the same question that our nation is asking: ‘Are you the one? Are you the one?’ I’m here to tell y’all, he is the one. Barack Obama!”

It had been a long time since Democrats had been so giddy about a presidential contest. Not since Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 landslide had they so thoroughly routed Republicans in a presidential election. Several weeks before the 2008 denouement, Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen forecast that when all the votes were counted, jubilant Democrats would “party like it’s 1964.” In fact, the comfortable victories achieved by Obama and the rest of his ticket made the night seem like political déjà vu. In the Senate, Democrats added 7 new members, adding a comfortable (and potentially filibuster-proof) cushion to their former 1-seat majority. The Democrats added 21 seats in the House; with the 30 the party had added two years earlier, the gains nearly equaled the 54 seats that House Republicans added in the 1994 elections to take the speaker’s gavel for the first time in 40 years.

Conservative columnist George F. Will observed that the 2006 and 2008 congressional results were the worst for the Grand Old Party since the Great Depression–era elections of 1930 and 1932, when Republicans also suffered back-to-back Election Night losses. Particularly stinging
was the defeat of Connecticut Republican Christopher Shays, a loss that reduced the number of New England House Republicans to 0. New York state elected only 3 Republicans to the 111th Congress, and only 8 of the 64 congressional districts in the entire Northeast were represented by Republicans. Democrats even took the New York City borough of Staten Island, long controlled by a Republican machine. As a consequence, no Republican in the new House represented an urban area of more than 500,000 inhabitants. The picture was equally dismal for Republicans at the state legislative level: north of Virginia, Republicans do not hold a majority in any legislative body except for the Pennsylvania State Senate.12

These tallies reflected the toxic political environment in which McCain and his fellow Republicans found themselves. Democrats won because voters officially pronounced the Bush presidency dead and wanted a new direction, a message that the electorate had attempted to deliver in 2006, and one that Bush had ignored, to the everlasting ire of Democrats and independents alike.13 As the campaign approached its conclusion, Democrats became competitive in congressional, state, and local districts, like Staten Island, that had previously been the exclusive province of the Republicans. Consequently, Republicans were reduced to their southern base, where McCain beat Obama by a solid margin, 54 percent to 45 percent. McCain’s southern support was buoyed by the 68 percent backing he received from the southern whites who remain a GOP mainstay.14 Republicans also maintained their grip on Dixie’s congressional seats. In the 111th Congress, 65 percent of senators and 52 percent of the representatives from the former Confederate states will be Republicans. Obama thus has become the first Democratic president to assemble a governing coalition that does not include the South. Obama’s cabinet and closest advisers include few who speak with southern accents, with the notable exception of secretary of defense Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration. The conservative Dixiecrats who used to vote with the GOP in Congress are gone.

A Southern Lock Becomes a Southern Cage

For decades, a southern lock ensured GOP dominance of the presidency. In the wake of Nixon’s Faustian bargain with South Carolina’s J. Strom Thurmond in 1968—a promise to go slow on civil rights and to appoint “strict constructionists” to the federal courts in return for support from
Thurmond and other southerners—Nixon and Reagan won near-unanimous southern support for their presidential bids.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, the Republican lock on the Confederacy strengthened each time Democrats placed a northerner at the top of their ticket (Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968, George S. McGovern in 1972, Walter F. Mondale in 1984, and Michael S. Dukakis in 1988). Clinton was the only Democrat who could pick the Republicans’ southern lock, and even that took some luck (a poor economy in 1992) and a lot of effort (choosing Tennessee’s Al Gore as vice president).\textsuperscript{16}

But in 2008, the southern lock turned into a southern cage. McCain’s best showings included the Deep South states of Alabama (60 percent), Louisiana (59 percent), Mississippi (56 percent), and South Carolina (54 percent). In all of these states, Obama’s overwhelming black vote was offset by a deluge of white votes: 88 percent for McCain in Alabama and Louisiana, and 84 percent in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, McCain performed well in the southern reaches of Appalachia, where he won 366 of its 410 counties, and he prevailed in Arkansas (59 percent), Kentucky (57 percent), Tennessee (57 percent), and West Virginia (56 percent).\textsuperscript{18} McCain’s victories there also resulted from his strong base among whites: he got 68 percent of the white vote in Arkansas, 63 percent in Kentucky and Tennessee, and 57 percent in West Virginia. Ironically, the home states of the most recent successful Democratic ticket, Arkansas and Tennessee, were solidly in McCain’s corner, and they remain firmly ensconced in the Republican camp when it comes to presidential contests.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet the more McCain and his fellow Republicans experienced solid victories in the Confederacy and Appalachia, the worse it became for the GOP everywhere else. The Republican Party now largely occupies territory controlled by the Democrats following William McKinley’s party-realigning triumph in 1896. Back then, Republicans dominated in the electoral-rich Northeast and Midwest, while Democrats retained their Civil War-era legacy of strength in the South along with populist support in the interior West. McCain’s chief strategist, Steve Schmidt, decries the shrinking of the GOP: “The party in the Northeast is all but extinct; the party on the West Coast is all but extinct; the party has lost the mid-South states—Virginia, North Carolina—and the party is in deep trouble in the Rocky Mountain West, and there has to be a message and a vision that is compelling to people in order for them to come back and to give consideration to the Republican party again.”\textsuperscript{20} Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, a prospective 2012 presidential candidate, concurs: “We cannot be a major-
ity governing party when we essentially cannot compete in the Northeast, we are losing our ability to compete in Great Lakes States, we cannot compete on the West Coast, we are increasingly in danger of [not] competing in the Mid-Atlantic States, and the Democrats are now winning some of the Western States. This is not a formula for being a majority governing party in this nation.”

The financial crisis that blossomed in October only sealed the Republicans’ fate. That month, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 6,000 points from its peak at 14,000 a year earlier. More than $8 trillion in stock value was lost in just a few weeks. On October 10 alone, the market swung 1,000 points, the first time it had ever experienced such violent gyrations. In the ensuing days, the market remained extremely jittery, rising 900 points one day and losing 700 the next. To ensure financial stability, the Bush administration proposed a massive $700 billion Wall Street rescue plan, the largest government intervention in the private markets since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration efforts of the 1930s. Despite rapid congressional passage of the federal bailout (after an initial false start), Wall Street’s financial crisis hit Main Street. Unemployment rose to 6.5 percent in October, with 2 million people described as being “long-term unemployed,” or not having jobs for 27 months or more. From January to October 2008, 1 million jobs evaporated.

And these were not the only bad economic tidings. Millions of otherwise employed citizens who joined what pollster John Zogby once called the “investor class” (and had been staunch supporters of George W. Bush) were shocked to open their 401(k) statements and discover that their retirement savings had dropped sharply. Home foreclosures reached record levels as the combination of unemployment and bad credit meant that millions had to surrender their personal palaces to the banks. Between July and September 2008, foreclosures totaled 765,000, with six states (Nevada, California, Florida, Ohio, Michigan, and Arizona) accounting for 60 percent of the lost homes. Obama won five of these states, losing only in McCain’s adopted home state of Arizona.

The result was a consumer crisis of confidence. In October, retail sales fell 2.8 percent, as would-be customers pared their spending in the wake of gloomy financial headlines. The prevailing mood was captured in the Consumer Confidence Index, which fell from 61.4 in September 2008 to just 38.0 one month later, its lowest level since 1967. Jerry Mills, an Ohio welder and former Bush supporter, was among those fearing foreclosure
and blaming the president: “I voted for Bush, and I can’t believe it. I don’t want to admit to it, I’m not happy with where he put us.”

In 2008, Mills backed Obama, as did 51 percent of his fellow Ohioans.

Not since 1933 had a new president assumed office under such dire circumstances—an economic implosion combined with two wars. Economic anxiety remained palpable, and further government action was required; Iraq was a source of danger, and a political solution to the war had yet to be established; and a growing consensus held that Afghanistan was slipping away and that more U.S. troops would be needed to succeed there. A New York Times editorial endorsing Obama captured the urgency of the moment: “It will be an enormous challenge just to get the nation back to where it was before Mr. Bush, to restore its self-confidence and its self-respect.”

Voters agreed, concluding that they could no longer afford the luxury of having an election dominated by social and cultural issues such as guns, gay marriage, abortion, Willie Horton, William Ayers, or even the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. According to the exit polls, only 30 percent of voters cited “shares my values” as the most important candidate quality (and 65 percent of those who did so backed McCain), whereas 34 percent mentioned “can bring about needed change” as the most important attribute they sought (and 89 percent of this group supported Obama). For the moment, the clanging culture wars had reached a tentative truce.

Other straws in the October wind also pointed toward a Democratic victory.

- Bush recorded a 21 percent job approval rating, 3 points lower than Nixon’s rating on the eve of his 1974 resignation and 1 point below the previous record, set by Harry S. Truman in February 1952, when the United States was beset by stalemate in the Korean War and a host of other Cold War-era challenges.
- Only 9 percent of respondents to one survey pronounced themselves satisfied with the direction of the United States, the lowest recorded response to that question in the history of the Gallup Poll.
- September fund-raising totals (reported in mid-October) showed that Obama had raised a record $150 million. Overall, the Democratic candidate had 3.1 million contributors (with 630,000 added in September alone) and an average contribution of $86. This treasure chest allowed Obama to blanket the airwaves with paid advertisements (in-
cluding a 30-minute infomercial) and financed an enormous get-out-the-vote campaign.33

- In mid-October, when the New York Times asked Tommy Thompson, a former Republican governor of Wisconsin, whether he was satisfied with the McCain campaign, he answered, “No, and I don’t know anyone who is.”34 A dozen years earlier, on the eve of Bob Dole’s defeat, Thompson had told the Times, “I thought George Bush’s [1992] campaign was probably the poorest run Presidential campaign—and I think [Dole’s campaign] is a close second.”35 On both occasions, Thompson expressed what many Republicans privately thought about their ticket’s chances in November.

Despite all the good news for Obama and his Democratic ticketmates, many questions remained unanswered until Americans gathered around their Election Night television campfires. Most of these questions involved race and whether the old shibboleths of politics still retained enough power to determine the outcome.

- Would October’s bad economic news be enough to induce voters to elect a black man president of the United States? Even the idea of an African American president was relatively new. In 1958, the Gallup Poll first asked its respondents whether they would support a “well-qualified” African American for President. Only 37 percent of respondents answered yes; 53 percent said no.36

- Would the so-called Bradley effect create an Election Night surprise? In the 1982 California gubernatorial race, Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, who was black, lost to Republican George Deukmejian, who was white, despite the fact that preelection polls showed Bradley with a significant lead.37

- Would any Bradley effect be offset by increased nonwhite (especially African American) turnout?

- Would enough blue-collar, Joe the Plumber whites come home to the Democratic Party after years of supporting Reagan and the Bushes?

- Would younger, twenty-first-century voters show up at the polls and vote for Obama? And would these first-time voters form part of a new and enduring Democratic majority?
Obama's comfortable win provided answers to all of these questions. Sixty-three percent of voters named the economy as the most important issue, and 53 percent of them supported Obama. Other concerns received scant mention: Iraq, 10 percent; terrorism, 9 percent; health care, 9 percent; energy, 7 percent. Second, Americans were more than willing to accept an African American as president. In fact, only 9 percent of respondents said that race was an important factor in their voting decisions, and 53 percent of these voters supported Obama. In fact, McCain’s age proved a more significant factor than did race: 15 percent of those polled said that age mattered, and 77 percent of these voters backed Obama. Third, there was no significant Bradley effect, as pre-election polls consistently gave Obama a lead of between 6 and 7 points, exactly the scenario that played out on Election Night. The disappearance of the Bradley effect heartened historians, who noted that the long arc of the civil rights movement that began in the 1960s had finally come to rest with the election of an African American president.

Republicans reeled. In many ways, their present-day funk is reminiscent of their despair in 1964. After the Johnson landslide, political scientist Nelson Polsby noted that efforts to revive the GOP “may be insufficient to prevent an effective shift in this country to a one-and-one-half party system.” But few Democrats compared Obama to Johnson. Instead, many Democrats believed (and hoped) that in Obama they had found their own modern-day version of an iconic Republican—Reagan.

Reagan and Obama share many similarities: both were gifted writers and effective communicators, and both somehow managed to avoid having attacks stick to them. (Years ago, Colorado congresswoman Pat Schroeder dubbed Reagan the “Teflon president” because of his ability to shrug off Democratic efforts to make him appear uncaring or callous toward the poor and to paint his tax and budget cuts as unfair.) More than two decades later, Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin evoked fears about an impending Obama presidency, telling audiences, “This is not a man who sees America the way you and I see America.” The GOP ticket accused Obama of being unpatriotic and having “palled around with” Ayers, an “old washed up terrorist.” But the repeated references to Ayers, a founding member of the Weather Underground who attempted to bomb the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War, actually cost the Republican ticket votes. According to an October survey, 23 percent of registered voters thought less of McCain than they did at the start...
of the campaign.\textsuperscript{47} The exit polls confirmed this result: nearly two-thirds of voters thought McCain had unfairly attacked Obama, while only a minority believed that Obama had unfairly attacked McCain.\textsuperscript{48}

1980 and 2008: History Repeats Itself

The comparisons between Reagan’s 1980 victory and Obama’s triumph in 2008 are striking. Twenty-eight years ago, Reagan deplored the incumbent president, Carter, telling Republican delegates, “Can anyone look at the record of this administration and say, ‘Well done?’ . . . Can anyone look at our reduced standing in the world and say, ‘Let’s have four more years of this?’”\textsuperscript{49} In 2008, Democrats quoted Reagan’s words back at another Bush and made sure that voters saw McCain as Bush’s stand-in. At one Democratic debate, Bush’s name was invoked 47 times, all of them negatively, while at a comparable Republican debate, Bush was mentioned just twice (and Representative Ron Paul, an antiwar candidate, did so a negative context).\textsuperscript{50} Obama seemed almost uninterested in running against McCain, a war hero, making “Bush-McCain” his opponent of choice.

Writing about Reagan’s 1980 victory, political scientist Gerald M. Pomper summoned the ghost of Oliver Cromwell, who told the British Parliament, “You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!” According to Pomper, Americans delivered the same message to Carter and the Democrats.\textsuperscript{51} In 2008, voters again channeled Cromwell, but this time they were speaking to Bush and his fellow Republicans. Indeed, after all the gains in party identification during the efflorescence of the Reagan years, Republicans unhappily discovered that their advances had evaporated. In 1980, 51 percent of voters called themselves Democrats, 30 percent were Republicans, and 19 percent were independents.\textsuperscript{52} By 1994, a high point of the Reagan Revolution, the number of partisan identifiers was nearly equal, with 34 percent of Americans calling themselves Democrats and 31 percent labeling themselves Republicans.\textsuperscript{53} The tug-of-war persisted for the rest of the Clinton regime and into the George W. Bush years. But by 2008, the number of Republican partisans was at 37 percent of likely voters, virtually the same as in 1980, while the number of Democratic identifiers had soared to 51 percent.\textsuperscript{54} Exit polls also found a 7-point Democratic advantage, the largest disparity between the parties since 1980.\textsuperscript{55} Simply put, the shifts toward the Democrats during Bush’s second
term were so powerful that it was as if Reagan’s two terms had never happened. Nowhere was the Republican collapse more evident than among independents. In 2007, only 33 percent of those with no party preference expressed favorable views of the GOP, while 55 percent held unfavorable opinions. Former Reagan pollster Richard B. Wirthlin likened the GOP attempts to woo disillusioned independents to “raking water up a hill.” A year later, only 44 percent of independents voted for McCain, an especially noteworthy figure given that McCain ran well among independents in the 2000 and 2008 Republican primaries; in fact, independents gave him the margin of victory in those contests. Other Republican notables—including Elizabeth Dole, John Sununu, Gordon Smith, and Ted Stevens—bid adieu to their Senate colleagues as a consequence of the one-two punch of overwhelming Democratic and independent opposition, and the 111th Congress is the first since 1952 that does not include either a Bush or a Dole.

At the heart of the problem lay the strong link between the Grand Old Party and George W. Bush. That association proved fatal to Republican hopes, and Republicans must break that connection to begin a recovery. In 2007, CBS News and the New York Times conducted a survey that showed just how tarnished the Republican brand had become. When respondents were asked to name the first word that came to their minds when thinking about the Republican Party, they answered,

- personal word—negative (12 percent);
- conservative (10 percent);
- liars/illegal/corruption (9 percent);
- good/positive word (5 percent);
- rich/upper class (7 percent);
- George W. Bush (5 percent);
- confused/disorganized (5 percent);
- bad/the bad people (4 percent);
- business/big business (3 percent);
- personal word (3 percent);
- strong/fights for its beliefs (2 percent);
- taxes/tax cuts/spending (2 percent);
reasonable/unreasonable (2 percent);
Iraq/war/wars/military (2 percent);
other policies (2 percent);
other words (10 percent);
don’t know/no answer (17 percent).

Republicans preferred to counter the bad polling news by summoning the glory days of the Reagan years. But Reagan had exited the White House two decades earlier. In many ways, the GOP’s reaction to bad news has resembled that of the Democrats following their 1980 rejection at the polls. That year, political scientist Wilson Carey McWilliams wrote that Reagan’s election signified the end of the New Deal era: “[T]he Roosevelt coalition has come to an end, as it was bound to. There are middle-aged voters today who were not born when Franklin Roosevelt died, and the youngest voters in 1980 were only a year old when John Kennedy was shot. We will remember Roosevelt and the Great Depression less and less, and—just as Truman has suddenly acquired cachet—Kennedy will increasingly be the symbol whose memory excites Democratic partisans.”

Today, something similar is happening as memories of Reagan steadily fade into history, taking with them his potent political coalition. The recent unhappy experiences of the Bush years remain fresh, especially with the young—that is, 18-year-old voters born in 1990—whose political attitudes were shaped almost exclusively by the Bush years.

A Twenty-first-Century Hoover?

Near the end of Reagan’s time in the White House, Wirthlin sent a memo to the president, taking stock of his accomplishments and outlining three “conditions for greatness” that “have long served to underpin the ‘can-do spirit’ that has made America a leader among nations”:

• there must be strong public confidence and pride in America—belief in “the great experiment”;
• there must be trust in the government and a confidence that elected officials can deal effectively with problems;
• the public view of the future must be hopeful and optimistic.
In each category, Wirthlin argued that Reagan met these criteria and therefore had earned a positive assessment of his presidency in the history books. And time has proven Wirthlin right.

By Wirthlin’s measures, however, George W. Bush has failed miserably. Confidence in the U.S. experiment and in the institutions of government that keep the American Dream alive fell to all-time lows. In 2007, the Gallup Organization found that public disenchantment had reached a level not seen since the dark days of Watergate:

- 51 percent of respondents trusted the federal government to handle international problems, the lowest percentage recorded since 1972;
- 47 percent had faith in the federal government to handle domestic problems, the lowest number since 1976;
- 43 percent believed in the executive branch of government, just above the 40 percent expressing support in April 1974, four months before Nixon resigned;
- 50 percent trusted the legislative branch, a decline from 62 percent in 2005;
- 55 percent trusted “the men and women in political life who are seeking office,” matching the low point reached in 2001.

It is no surprise, therefore, that voters turned on Bush. Two-thirds were dissatisfied with the way he was running the country; 70 percent said that he had no clear plan for getting U.S. troops out of Iraq; and 75 percent maintained that he had acquired more power than his predecessors and that this development had been bad for the country. Most tellingly, when asked whether George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan had been a better chief executive, more than three-quarters chose Reagan, reaffirming Wirthlin’s conditions. For nearly all of his second term, Bush’s approval rating remained far below 50 percent, a record for longevity in the annals of presidential polling. Given this lack of public consent, it is fair to say that the United States did not have a fully functional president before Obama took the oath of office.

Several academics and even a former president have echoed these harsh judgments. Princeton history professor Sean Wilentz believes that Bush is “headed for a colossal historical disgrace.” George Mason University political scientist James P. Pfiffner maintains that Bush’s excesses—for exam-
ple, suspending the Geneva Conventions and interrogating prisoners using harsh methods; creating military tribunals to try terrorist suspects; permitting warrantless wiretapping; and deciding which laws to enforce and which ones to bypass—endangered democracy itself: “Even if President Bush was a noble defender of freedom, the authority that he claims to be able to ignore the law, if allowed to stand, would constitute a dangerous precedent that future presidents might use to abuse their power.”

Columbia political scientist Eric Foner maintains that Bush “has managed to combine the lapses of leadership, misguided policies and abuse of power of his failed predecessors,” concluding that “there is no alternative but to rank [Bush] as the worst president in history.”

Yale political scientist Stephen Skowronek believes Bush’s abuses of power helped institutionalize an imperial presidency. And in a breach of presidential protocol, former president Carter publicly denounced Bush: “I think as far as the adverse impact on the nation around the world, this administration has been the worst in history.” Not to be outdone, Republican senator Chuck Hagel told the Council on Foreign Relations that the Bush presidency was “one of the most arrogant, incompetent administrations I’ve ever seen personally or ever read about.”

Perhaps there was no greater commentary on Bush’s shortcomings than a McCain television advertisement aired just three weeks prior to Election Day in which the candidate stated the obvious: “The last eight years haven’t worked very well, have they?” But even that admission proved to be too little, too late. In his final debate with Obama, an exasperated McCain tried to shed the “Bush-McCain” label that Obama had pinned to the Republican’s chest: “Senator Obama, I am not President Bush. If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago. I’m going to give a new direction to this economy in this country.”

But McCain’s protestations suffered yet another setback the weekend before the balloting when he received Vice President Dick Cheney’s hearty endorsement: “I believe the right leader for this moment in history is Senator John McCain. John is a man who understands the danger facing America. He’s a man who has looked into the face of evil and not flinched. He’s a man who’s comfortable with responsibility, and has been since he joined the armed forces at the age of seventeen. He’s earned our support and confidence, and the time is now to make him commander-in-chief.”

Obama seized on Cheney’s words, cutting a commercial quoting Cheney and sarcastically adding that McCain had worked hard for the vice presi-
dent’s support, voting with the Bush-Cheney administration 90 percent of the time.

There is one particularly obvious reason why McCain sought to keep his distance from Bush and why Obama never failed to mention Bush and McCain in the same breath: Bush’s job approval ratings descended into the 20 percent range, especially as the financial crisis transformed discontented voters into scared voters. As Bush prepared to depart the White House, 79 percent of those surveyed said that they would not miss him, and 48 percent of respondents picked him as among the worst of our recent presidents. Clare Boothe Luce once said that every president gets one line in the history books. Thus, George Washington “was the Father of the Country”; Abraham Lincoln “saved the Union and freed the slaves”; Franklin Roosevelt “launched the New Deal and fought World War II”; and Reagan “helped end the Cold War.” Bush’s assessment has not yet been written, but it seems likely to include words such as terrorism, September 11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Katrina, and financial crisis.

In his 1933 Inaugural Address, Roosevelt delivered a harsh assessment of his predecessor, Herbert Hoover: “Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.” Obama echoed Roosevelt, noting in his Election Night victory speech, “For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime—two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century. . . . The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even in one term. But, America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you, we as a people will get there.” During the next four years, the hope is that the financial crisis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the “dark realities of the moment” will give way not just to brighter days but to a sense of order in both foreign and domestic affairs, something Americans deeply craved at the start of the Obama administration.

Elections that transform U.S. politics often happen because voters want a restoration of order. So it was in 1968. In his masterful Nixonland, historian Rick Perlstein wrote that the nightly televised chaos was crucial to Nixon’s victory: “Turn on the TV: burning huts in Vietnam. Turn on the TV: burning buildings in Watts. Turn on the TV: one set of young people were comparing another set of young people to Nazis, and Da Nang was equated with Nagasaki.” Similarly, Wirthlin advised Reagan in 1980 to “convey the clearest possible message that Reagan stands for leadership
and control. The prevailing view in America is that no one is in control; the prevailing impression given by the [Carter] White House is that no one can be in control; and the prevailing view abroad is that the will to be in control is gone. For both Nixon and Reagan, promises to restore order provided a powerful mandate.

A similar desire for order was evident in 2008. Writing a few weeks before the election, New York Times columnist David Brooks described how the proverbial “Patio Man”—a suburban male beset by falling home prices, job insecurity, credit card debt, and investments gone sour—was searching for order amid the financial chaos. Patio Man, who liked Nixon and adored Reagan, was shifting his thinking “from risk to caution, from disorder to consolidation.” According to Brooks, the cool, self-contained, and reassuring Obama was poised to win lots of votes from Patio Men (and Patio Women) because he seemed like “the safer choice—socially moderate, pragmatic, and fiscally hawkish.” Exit polls proved Brooks right, as suburban voters backed Obama by a margin of 50 percent to 48 percent.

But it was more than the votes of discontented Patio People that made Obama president. A new demography had reshaped the political landscape and transformed old ways of thinking about politics.

The Real Majority Becomes a Real Minority

In 1970, Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg published The Real Majority, a tour de force that concluded the real majority consisted of those voters who were “un-young, un-poor, and un-black.” These voters, who were suburban, married, white, middle aged, and middle income, who had kids under age 18 residing at home, and who attended church regularly, had drifted away from Roosevelt’s Democratic Party and were about to enter a Republican Party led by Nixon and Reagan, who conjured memories of a happier, more orderly era.

These newly minted real majority Republicans were decidedly middle class and relatively prosperous, thanks to the successes of Roosevelt’s New Deal, which transformed a generation of have-nots into haves. According to Scammon and Wattenberg, the members of the real majority were concerned about an emerging social issue—a first explication of the culture wars. Scammon and Wattenberg listed crime, drug use, pornography, law and order, and race as voter priorities. Nixon speechwriter Patrick J. Buchanan was an avid fan of the book, and he sent it along to Nixon, who,
in turn, encouraged his fellow Republicans to employ the social issue in their upcoming campaigns. In 1971, Buchanan fired off a memo to Nixon on “Dividing the Democrats.” In it, Buchanan argued that race was the ultimate social issue that could separate white Democrats from the party of Roosevelt. Buchanan urged the Nixon White House to act: “Bumper stickers calling for black Presidential and especially Vice-Presidential candidates should be spread out in the ghettos of the country. We should do what is within our power to have a black nominated for Number Two, at least at the Democratic National Convention.” Such gambits, he added, could “cut the Democratic Party and the country in half; my view is we would have far the larger half.”

Although Buchanan’s bumper stickers were never printed, the emergence of the real majority, with its emphasis on social and cultural issues, transformed many Democrats from economic voters into values voters. That transmutation helped Nixon to a narrow victory in 1968 and to a sweeping landslide in 1972, when his coalition was augmented by supporters of a third-party candidate, former Alabama governor George C. Wallace. Watergate was only a temporary detour in the building of a new Republican coalition that encompassed large swaths of Scammon and Wattenberg’s real majority. As chapter 6 notes, Reagan completed the work when he appealed to the real majority’s conservative values of family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom and its desire for order in an age where these old verities had come under siege from the baby boomers.

In 2008, the real majority remained strongly tilted toward the Republican Party. McCain won majorities of the white vote and held onto a plurality of middle-aged voters—those who had come of age during the Reagan years. McCain also performed well among the older whites who formed Scammon and Wattenberg’s real majority in 1970. While middle-income voters (those making between $50,000 and $75,000) barely supported McCain (shaken as they were by the financial crises on Wall Street and Main Street), other elements of Scammon and Wattenberg’s real majority remained loyal to the GOP—married voters, those with children under the age of 18 living in their households, white Catholics, white Protestants, and regular churchgoers (see table 11).

Especially noteworthy is the largely white hue of the 2008 Republican coalition. Exit polls revealed that nearly 90 percent of McCain’s total vote came from whites. This finding was reflected in the crowds that came to see McCain and Palin in their joint appearances. According to New York
Times columnist Frank Rich, “There are indeed so few people of color at McCain events that a black senior writer from The Tallahassee Democrat was mistakenly ejected by the Secret Service from a campaign rally in Panama City in August, even though he was standing with other reporters and showed his credentials. His only apparent infraction was to look glaringly out of place.”

But the influence of white voters is quickly waning. In 1976, when Carter became the first southern white elected president since Zachary Taylor in 1848, whites constituted 90 percent of the electorate. By 2004, that figure had fallen to 77 percent. And in 2008, the white percentage of the electorate fell further, to 74 percent, the lowest in the history of exit polling. The U.S. Census Bureau recently estimated that by 2042, whites will be a minority throughout the United States, a prediction that supports the idea that the total percentage of white voters will continue to drop.

Obama was prescient in thinking his race would be an asset in 2008: “I think that if you can tell people, ‘We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who’s half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian,’ then they’re going to think that he may have a better sense of what’s going on in our lives and in our country. And they’d be right.”

Other portions of Scammon and Wattenberg’s real majority are also on the wane. In 1970, the United States was still an industrialized nation with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites, aged 45–59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites, aged 60 and older</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 45–59</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Catholics</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Protestants/Other Christian</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern whites</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000–$75,000 income</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live in suburbs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly churchgoers</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonworking women</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who want candidate that shares my values</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International exit polls, November 4, 2008.
only hints of the emerging Information Age. Industrialization placed a premium on working with one’s hands; the Information Age requires an active mind that is the means of production. Thus, a college education has become today’s union card for employment. Many Americans find themselves not just attending four-year colleges but also earning graduate degrees to advance their employment prospects. In many respects, McCain and Obama were twentieth- and twenty-first-century candidates, respectively. In the 10 states with the fewest number of residents aged 25 years or older who had earned a bachelor’s degree or more, McCain prevailed in 8 (often by solid margins). Moreover, in all of these states except Nevada, Mississippi, and Indiana, McCain won solid majorities of those who either held only high school diplomas or had not finished high school (see table 12).

That portion of the electorate that can be best described as un-young, un-poor, and un-black is truly waning. Scammon and Wattenberg’s real majority could only muster 48 percent of the vote for Bush in 2000. Four years later, Bush garnered just 51 percent of all ballots cast, and he reached that level largely as a consequence of the fear still emanating from the September 11 attacks and the 44 percent support he received among Hispanics. In 2008, McCain won only 46 percent of the votes cast. Each year, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of Population with B.A. Degree or More</th>
<th>Statewide Percentage of McCain Vote</th>
<th>McCain Percentage among High School Graduate or Less</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>56 (won)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>59 (won)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>65 (won)</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>60 (won)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>43 (lost)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>56 (won)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>59 (won)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>49 (lost)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statatab/tables/08s0221.pdf (accessed October 1, 2008); Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International exit polls, November 4, 2008.
un-young, un-poor, and un-black portion of the electorate becomes smaller. The real majority of 1970 is today’s new real minority.

“We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For”

After wrestling Hillary Clinton to a draw in the 24 Democratic primaries and caucuses held on Super Tuesday, Barack Obama took to the stage and repeated his mantra of change. But this time he added a twist: “Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”92 In this speech, as in so many others, Obama implied that his supporters were just the sort of twenty-first-century citizens who could make change happen. Throughout the campaign, Obama attracted crowds that were both racially diverse and young. These demographics proved crucial to his victory.

In 2008, youth mattered. Simply put, voters who had lived a majority of their lives in the twentieth century tilted toward McCain. But voters who were likely to spend more than half their lives in the twenty-first century were strongly inclined toward Obama. Two-thirds of young people aged 18 to 29 voted for Obama, a dramatic shift toward the Democratic Party. In 2000, Al Gore carried 18- to 29-year-olds by just 2 points; four years later, Kerry took that group by 9 points; Obama beat McCain within this group by 34 points.

History teaches that after a political party captures a generation, its members often remain loyal. During the 1930s, for example, Roosevelt’s popularity among the very young was so strong that demographers began to speak of a New Deal generation. Accordingly, Americans who came of age between 1930 and 1937 gave the Democrats a 14-point advantage over the Republicans in party identification; among those who voted for the first time between 1938 and 1941, the Democratic lead swelled to 20 points.93 Likewise, voters who backed Reagan when they were young largely have remained loyal to the GOP. In 2008, those voters (now aged between 45 and 59) split down the middle, giving 49 percent of their votes to each of the major-party candidates. The only cohort in which McCain did better was older voters, among whom he took 51 percent of votes while Obama received 47 percent.94

College-educated voters backed Obama. Just as states with few college-educated voters were more likely to back McCain, those with higher proportions of college-educated voters supported Obama. Of the 15 states
with the highest percentage of their populations aged 25 and older who possessed bachelor’s or other advanced degrees, all except Kansas voted for Obama (see table 13). Many of these states—Massachusetts, Colorado, Connecticut, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Illinois—have Information Age economies. Among people with postgraduate degrees, Obama received two-thirds of the vote (see table 13). The collapse of Republican support among the most highly educated has made the backing Democrats receive from today’s new “creative class” a dominant feature of the electoral landscape.95

Another important component of the Obama coalition was nonwhites, who now comprise a quarter of the electorate. In 2004, Bush took 11 percent of the African American vote; McCain captured just 4 percent of that group, a historic low for the Republican Party.96 As recently as the 1940s, the Party of Lincoln collected a substantial share of the African American vote. For example, in 1940, Republicans won 32 percent of the black vote, and 42 percent of African Americans called themselves Republicans.97 Even in 1960, Nixon received one out of every four black votes.98 But after Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in 1965 and Republican

### TABLE 13. Obama Vote in Top 15 College-Educated States with Greatest Numbers of College Graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of Population with B.A. Degree or More</th>
<th>Statewide Percentage of Obama Vote</th>
<th>Obama Percentage of College Graduates</th>
<th>Obama Percentage among Post-college Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>93 (won)</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>54 (won)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>61 (won)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>67 (won)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>54 (won)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>72 (won)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>54 (won)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>53 (won)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>41 (lost)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s0221.pdf (accessed October 1, 2008); Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International exit polls, November 4, 2008.
lawmakers subsequently promised to go slow on civil rights and school busing, African American support for the GOP fell into the low double-digits. Thus in 1972, Nixon won just 18 percent of the black vote in what was otherwise a historic landslide. 99

Republican support among African Americans in the low single digits is a prescription for disaster that is compounded by the poor GOP showing among Hispanics. In 2008, two-thirds of Hispanics voted for Obama, a sharp contrast from Bush’s showing among members of that group in 2004. Bush won a substantial number of Hispanic votes for three reasons. First, he provided strong leadership following September 11 attacks. Second, he strongly condemned anti-Hispanic ballot measures. During his 1994 campaign for the Texas governorship, for example, Bush opposed Proposition 187, a California initiative that would have made it illegal for state agencies to provide assistance to illegal immigrants. As president, he continued to oppose anti-Hispanic measures, including state-sponsored English-only laws. As he wrote in his campaign autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, “Those who advocate ‘English-only’ poke a stick in the eye of people of Hispanic heritage. ‘English-only’ says me, not you. It says I count, but you do not. This is not the message of America.” 100 Finally, Bush’s strident opposition to gay marriage played well among Hispanics, who have been largely unsympathetic to gay-rights claims.

But in 2008, the Hispanic vote tilted strongly to Obama. One obvious reason was continued Republican opposition to immigration reform. Obama won 8 of the 10 states with the greatest proportions of Hispanics (see table 14). These states combined to give Obama 168 electoral votes, nearly half of his total. 101 The combination of overwhelming black and Hispanic support for the Democratic ticket led Republican consultant Steve Lombardo to conclude, “Given the demographic trends in the country, the GOP is unlikely to win any future presidential election if it is losing 95 percent of the black vote and 67 percent of the Hispanic vote.” 102

Stepping off a Bridge

Accepting renomination at the 1996 Democratic National Convention, President Bill Clinton observed that during his second term, his administration would construct a “bridge to the twenty-first century.” 103 But Clinton’s bridge took several detours: the 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal that resulted in his impeachment; the September 11 attacks; and the wars in
Afghanistan and Iraq, to name but a few. Obama’s election seems to have completed Clinton’s bridge, and Americans have finally stepped off on the other side and marched into the future. Nearly two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “People often manage public affairs very badly.” But, he added, becoming genuinely engaged “is bound to extend their mental horizon and shake them out of the rut of ordinary routine.”

The lethargy and fear that prevented the public from marching forward during the Clinton and Bush years has given way to a newfound sense of urgency that the United States must either fully embrace the twenty-first century or risk becoming a former superpower enervated by memories of yesteryear.

The 2008 election surely represented a final public judgment on George W. Bush. But it was much more than that, for it represented a moment when a new demography caught up to a new politics. Speaking in the afterglow of Obama’s victory, MSNBC commentator and Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson declared, “This is a moment of demarcation. There was a before and an after. We don’t know what happens in the after. But we know it’s different from the before. It feels different to me to be an American tonight.”

Robinson spoke as an African American, but he could have just been as easily speaking for all those who find themselves part of the nation’s new demographic major.---

### Table 14. Obama Vote in Top Ten Hispanic States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of Hispanics Eligible to Vote as a Total of the State Population</th>
<th>Statewide Percentage for Obama</th>
<th>Hispanic Percentage for Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>61 (won)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>44 (lost)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>45 (lost)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>55 (won)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>51 (won)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>54 (won)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>N/A&lt;br&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>57 (won)</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>62 (won)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*It appears as though the question was not asked in New York.
The racial, family, women’s rights, and gay-rights revolutions, combined with an unusually engaged public disturbed about the direction the United States was taking, gave Obama and his fellow Democratic officeholders an enormous opportunity to make policy changes and consolidate political gains. The immediate aftermath of Obama’s victory included a tremendous sense of optimism. In a December 2008 poll, 56 percent of respondents believed that Obama’s victory bode well for the nation’s future. George McGovern, the Democrats’ 1972 presidential nominee, agreed that the United States was heading into a period of reconciliation: “I believe we have a chance to heal the wounds the nation has suffered in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. This recovery may take a generation and will depend on the election of a series of rational presidents and Congresses. At age 85, I won’t be around to witness the completion of the difficult rebuilding of our sorely damaged country, but I’d like to hold on long enough to see the healing begin.”

Any healing will depend largely on whether Americans are willing to cast aside the familiar and comfortable conflicts. In that regard, 2008 sent mixed messages: while Obama’s election indicated just such a willingness, the passage of California’s Proposition 8 implied just the opposite. In fact, we seem to be at the cusp of a moment when our social experiences are about to be woven into a new political culture. Translating these new experiences regarding race, family, gender roles, sexuality, and how we express our religious faiths will create new areas of political discomfort and conflict. Ideology has not ended, but the Reagan era has come to a close and the Obama era has begun. What this new period holds for us both politically and as Americans is unclear. But this much is apparent: after traipsing off Bill Clinton’s bridge, however slowly and tentatively Americans have done so, we are entering a period of consequence.