

## A PERMANENT DEMOCRATIC MAJORITY?

*Roman Sehling*

The presidential election campaign of 2008 will probably enter the history of the US as the most expensive and most publicized ever. The situation of the Republicans was as bad as it could be: the poll ratings of the incumbent, George W. Bush, were among the lowest ever recorded for a US president. Moreover, 29 Republican congressmen had declared they would not stand again. The party had little option but to go on the defensive, leaving entire regions to the Democrats almost without a struggle. The Republican candidate, John McCain, is certainly not to blame. According to Mr McCain's campaign manager, other candidates had been faced with the same situation in the past: Mr Bush's unpopularity had rubbed off on his party.

Surveys indicate that 62 percent of the electorate saw the economy as the undisputed top issue of the elections. On that subject, 53 percent favoured the Democratic challenger, Mr Obama, while no more than 45 percent saw Mr McCain in front. The war in Iraq, terrorism, and health insurance took a back seat. Even the election campaign of 2004 did not have such a clear focus.

Mr Obama's success is respectable, even though it was not the hoped-for landslide victory. Early on, people in the Democratic party were asking themselves whether it would be better to 'open up' the south or the west. As it turned out, Mr Obama scored in both regions. Thanks to the candidate's 'coat tails', Democratic senators were elected in North Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, Oregon, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Unlike Mr Kerry, Mr Obama succeeded in consolidating his position not only in the southern regions but also in conservative and rural areas. His gains were particularly large in the exurbs and suburbs. It was the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech University which found out that the suburbs currently form the stronghold of the political centre in the USA. The Republicans' small-town values never took hold in this environment. And, after all, Mr Obama's team conducted an extremely lively campaign there, too, supported by an army of volunteers who showed the flag demonstratively in all urban areas large and small.

Overall, Mr Obama won a majority among women, blacks, Hispanics, and young voters. It is true that he 'only' succeeded in convincing 43 percent of the white voters, but he did much better with them than his white predecessors. Among Afro-Americans, the turnout was remarkable. As expected, Mr Obama succeeded in increasing his vote among that group markedly above the level attained by Mr Kerry four years ago. Having increased their number

by ten million, Latino voters endorsed the Democratic candidate at 67 to 31 percent. The Latino vote proved especially important not only in the southwest of the country, i.e. in Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico, but also in Virginia, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, where Latinos represent nearly five percent of the electorate. Even in Florida, where Mr Bush had been in front the last time around, the majority of Latinos voted for Mr Obama. Although 84 percent of the older Cuban Americans voted for McCain, as many as 55 percent of the younger voters supported Mr Obama. One fact that will be of great importance in the future is that the Democrats succeeded in winning over 61 percent of the people under 30, while the Republicans won only 31 percent.

Even among religious voters, Mr Obama won a majority. Thus, Catholics voted for him at 54 versus 45 percent, while McCain's lead among Evangelicals and Protestants shrank visibly. It is worth mentioning that the Republicans lost particularly among white Evangelicals in swing states like Ohio and Colorado. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life stressed that there is a marked difference between white and non-white religious voters. According to the Forum, only a scant majority of white Catholics voted for Mr McCain, while Mr Obama has to thank the Catholic Latin-Americans for his lead among Catholics in general. More or less the same holds true for the Protestants. Jewish voters had no problems with a black candidate: 77 percent cast their vote for Mr Obama, and only 22 percent for Mr McCain.

Has the grand old party turned into a grand outdated party? In point of fact, the average party member today is not so much 'grand' as old, white, and without a university diploma. Increasingly suburban and ethnically diverse, the US today is influenced by the post-baby boomer generation. The influence of Vietnam and the culture wars of the sixties is fading. To the new generation, the typical Republican politician is corrupt and has little competence and no values to champion. The consequence is that the Democrats are now regarded as better performers even in those areas of competence that used to be the classical preserve of the Republicans.

Whatever Barack Obama will do to sell himself as president, his name is already writ large in the history of election campaigns. The first thing that comes to mind is the sensational sum of 750 million US Dollars in donations gathered by a host of helpers. Another is Mr Obama's pronounced technology-friendliness which enabled his assistants to organize themselves efficiently and take advantage of the internet – blogs, You Tube, and Facebook. Sources say that 46 percent of Americans used email, internet, and SMS facilities to exchange information and views on the elections. 35 percent were watching online videos: Obama videos scored 110 million hits, while Mr McCain's recorded only 27 million. Among the ten percent who used Facebook or MySpace, Mr Obama was in the lead again: 3.3 million Facebook and

more than one million MySpace users sided with him, while only 600,000 Facebook and somewhat more than 200,000 MySpace users supported Mr McCain. Online, the political dialogue was maintained by about 11 percent of US citizens. One thing is clear: even though television remains the most important source of information, it was this election which raised the internet to independence as an information source for the masses. It was Mr Obama who took advantage of the social networks of the internet like no one before – with unprecedented success.

Now, what are the reasons for the defeat of Mr McCain and his Republicans? To begin with, the top candidate's decision to interrupt his campaign to attend to the credit crunch was counter-productive. Then, the maverick's nomination of Sarah Palin, who occasionally distinguished herself by displaying great gaps in her knowledge, gave rise to the impression that his strategy was faulty. When he began in July to sharpen his profile as an aggressive public speaker who suddenly endorsed the same tax-cutting policy he had ridiculed in the senate before, Mr McCain lost a great deal of his credibility. When he proposed sending more troops to Iraq, the candidate gambled away any chance he may have had of appealing to moderate and independent voters. However, the Republicans suffered the greatest harm from Mrs Palin's public appearance who, for instance, began attacking Mr Obama because of his connection with the former terrorist, Bill Ayers, even before Mr McCain had released the subject for public debate. Very likely, it is all these factors together that may explain why the Republican campaign was generally seen as unorganized, negative, and bad.

Mark Selter, a confidant of Mr McCain, criticized the media for having been unfair in their coverage, applying two different sets of standards, and showing an unmistakable preference for Mr Obama. Thomas Frank, an author close to the Democratic Party, rejected any attempt to hold the media responsible for the conservatives' defeat, even in part, adding that Mr McCain had much to thank the media for. In the summer of 2008, when his campaign began to show signs of running out of steam, they had not written him off entirely, far from it. Howard Kurtz believes that the media should have been dealing with Mr Obama more critically. Even Hillary Clinton had asked sarcastically why the media were not offering to put Mr Obama on a cushion.

The conservatives should have expected the media to show increased interest when Mrs Palin was nominated as a surprise candidate. After all, she was a complete unknown who might even have become president some day, and yet she had been screened systematically from the media. On the one hand, this had forced the media, in a manner of speaking, to go looking for material about Sarah Palin. On the other, the campaign would not have produced another similarly newsworthy issue in any case.

Now, what does Mr Obama's election mean? Does it herald a reconfiguration of America's political landscape, or is the Democrat's victory nothing more than a temporary reverse of the Republicans? One thing is certain: the future president has a lead of almost 7.5 million voters. However, this does not give him a mandate to implement a comprehensive package of 'left' reforms. As Newt Gingrich put it, the USA still are a centre-right nation which merely gave a drubbing to the Republicans because of their bad performance in government. Bill Clinton's pollster, Doug Schoen, agrees, adding that the president-elect would be well advised not to lose sight of the political centre.

On their part, the Republicans hope that the new wielders of power in Washington will feel sufficiently buoyed up by their past victories to overshoot the mark and, consequently, suffer defeat in the coming intermediates. Should this come to pass, this scenario would certainly give a boost to the Republican camp.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 12/2008, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.83-87