

## Will Barack Obama Change America?

The election of Barack Obama as the next President of the United States has brought enormous excitement around the world. FINALLY after eight years of the Bush administration, Americans have elected a man who seems to be interested in the rest of the world and to have some understanding of America's role within it (rather than above it). His campaign theme was "change" and America clearly needs a lot of change.

I don't want to spoil anyone's parade. I was as excited as anyone about the election of America's first black President. But I believe it is important for all of us to understand a few things about this country and this President-elect before we allow ourselves to be too carried away with enthusiasm and (ultimately) disappointed about the realities of an Obama presidency.

First, it is fundamental to understand that America is not a parliamentary democracy. With all the attention that is poured on the American presidential elections, it can be quite easy to misunderstand some basic facts about the American political system. The most important of these is the fact that the President does not write the law in the United States – Congress does. The President has the power to suggest laws and ultimately has the power to veto laws he does not approve of, but he cannot and does not legislate.

Over the next few years it will be the American Congress that writes the laws that Obama may sign. These politicians will fight first and foremost for policies that are in the interest of the local constituencies. Do not expect these politicians to think about the general interest – and certainly do not expect them to think about America's relationship with Europe. These are *local* politicians who are elected to fight for *local* issues – bridges, roads, museums, subsidies for their farmers, etc.. One might hope that American politics will change in this regard with the new president. But it won't.

The second reason we should not expect too much change is that Obama will become the leader of a deeply divided country. This election was held during what appears to be the most severe economic crisis since the 1930s and Obama was effectively running against the most unpopular president in modern history. Still he won less than 53 percent of the vote. The fact that his election was not a landslide tells us much about the America he will have to govern.

Finally, President-elect Obama has appointed conservatives to the key positions in his administration. To be sure, there has been considerable praise for his choices to fill cabinet and key leadership positions. But look again. Who is leading the choir? It is the conservatives and Republicans. Why? The conservatives in America are giddy over Obama's appointments because he is *not* pursuing a "leftist" agenda. Oddly, it is the people who lost in the election who seem to be most happy about how President-Elect Obama is promising to govern *after* the election.

How will the Obama administration deal with the economic crisis that has befallen America and the world? He promises to do basically the same thing the Bush administration has done... only more of it: Give multi-billion dollar subsidies for America's largest corporations and an even more billions to middle class consumers and homeowners who have bought more than they can afford.

A government that would actually change America would be one that actively tries to put America on new track - not just run faster down the one this country has been on for the last several decades. What would that look like? A radical idea might be that the government use some of the hundreds of billions of dollars they will borrow from future generations to actually invest in education for those

generations. An even more radical idea might be that instead of subsidizing General Motors and Ford because they built too many huge gas guzzling cars, maybe we should put a tax on oil and gasoline.

Perhaps on January 20, 2009 we will hear a speech from the new President telling Americans that things really have to change. That Americans will need to make sacrifices in order to build a better future for America and the world. I certainly hope that this is what we will hear. But will he follow these words with policies that actually ask for sacrifice or promise specific changes? So far, at least, it looks like change is just a six letter word.

Sven Steinmo  
European University Institute  
December 16, 2009