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# Obama Win Breaks Barriers

by  
*Dr. Sukhdev Shah*<sup>1</sup>

In its front-page news coverage on November 5, *The Washington Post* ran the headline: *Obama Makes History*. Obama winning the US Presidency is history indeed. This also is a breaking down of barriers—of race, origin, wealth, connections, and length of time one needs to be in politics to assume leadership role. Of the last one, countries like Nepal need to take special notice!

Judging from the standard qualities one needs to prevail in politics—in America as well as elsewhere—you are needed to be endowed with all or most of the attributes alluded to above. Barack Obama’s resounding victory in the US election, held on November 4, convincingly proves that impossible could, indeed, happen.

To have a glimpse of President-elect Obama’s background, he, of course, did not have the “right” race—he is black or semi-white (born of a black father and white mother)—in an overwhelmingly white country (71 percent of US population). Much more notable: at 12 percent of population blacks in US do not even form a “super minority”. Hispanics—immigrants from South America—will soon surpass blacks to be the largest minority group in US.

Besides the relative size of their number, blacks are not a normal minority in the country. They were brought from Africa as slaves centuries ago, and they remained so until the abolition of slavery in 1860s which, however, precipitated a Civil War in the country—between US States in favor of or against the slavery. Although pro-slavery States lost the war, segregation and exclusion of black population from national mainstream continued for another hundred years, until the passage of Civil Rights legislation in 1964. Much opposition to Civil Rights legislation continued thereafter, culminating in the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, the luminary civil rights leader who sought equal treatment for blacks.

Now all this is history and Barack Obama holds the Crown or soon will—come January 20, 2009. However, the most noticeable thing about Obama’s success is the comprehensiveness of his victory. Of course, he got most of the black votes—over 95 percent—compared with normal 80 percent of blacks votes won by Democratic candidates during last elections. More significant fact is that a majority of white, Hispanic, and Asian electorate voted for Obama. Looked also from cross-section of regions, religions, income levels and age groups, Obama received a much wider level of support than any recent US Presidential candidates. He, of course, got a large proportion of electoral votes (about two thirds), which actually decides the winner. Obama was also

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shah, a Nepal national, is based in Washington DC.

a winner counting the popular votes (all voting-age US population who cast ballots in the election) which, at 54 percent, was the highest since Jimmy Carter's win in 1976.

*The Obama Magic:* Obama was absolutely unknown to his countrymen until he was elected to the US Senate from Illinois four years ago, in 2004. Prior to that, he had served in the State Legislator just for two years. Until that time, he was largely an academic, a well-reputed scholar at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he also served briefly as editor of Harvard Business Review. While at Harvard—still in his early 30s—he impressed the university administration and his academic colleagues as a shrewd team-player, consensus-builder and, of course, a fine orator. More than anything else, his oratorical power—backed by his intelligence, academic training, straight-talking style, and his distinction of being a black—gave the credibility he needed in politics, first at the local level and then nationally.

Noticing Obama's star-quality, he was selected the keynote speaker for the 2004 Democratic Party Convention that chose John Kerry as Party's nominee for President. Convention audience was impressed by Obama's convincing style of presentation, communication skills, and his knowledge of national issues and world affairs. Obama won the Senate race some months later which also placed him in the right place to go up higher in national politics—prepare the grounds for seeking presidency.

This he did from early 2007 on, by announcing his intentions to become Democratic Party candidate for 2008 presidential election.

At the beginning of his primary election campaign in late 2007, Obama was hammered by many drawbacks to be a credible candidate, most importantly his race and him being the first generation American. His father had come to US as student from Kenya, in the 1950s, and married a white woman. Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1961, but some disputed this by claiming that he is not a US citizen. However, such characterization of Obama was not taken seriously by the voting public and Obama campaign had his hospital birth certificate posted on its election website.

Aside from race and nationality, a much larger obstacle Obama faced was the money he needed to launch a credible campaign. US Government does provide financing to presidential candidates for meeting election expenses but, compared to hundreds of millions needed for the campaign, government financing amounts to no more than a start-up support. Most of the money the candidate needs for a successful campaign has to be raised by personal endeavor and through connections, with some level of support also coming from the party that a candidate represents.

No other magic about Obama's candidacy was more eye-catching than his success in raising the campaign money—and tons of it. Reportedly, he raised \$650 million, compared to about \$400 million for his rival, John McCain. Noticing the success of his fund-raising Charisma, Obama refused to accept public funding for his campaign, which also puts limit on how much a candidate can raise using its own network.

More noticeable—and a forerunner of Obama’s successful candidacy—was the grassroots support he generated to help finance his campaign. A large chunk of his campaign money was collected from the website donations of small amounts, and not from large donors and lobbyists who do so to gain political favors. Obama’s campaign, in most part, was funded by small donors—million of them—who had no direct stake in Obama’s win. They just felt good about Obama and the *change* he represented—Obama’s campaign logo.

*America is changed:* It was an incredible sight seeing the tumultuous crowd gathered at Chicago’s Grant Park to celebrate Obama’s electoral triumph on the night of November 4. All of them came—old, young, men, women, blacks, whites—a crowd of over 100,000 at mid-night was as diverse as America has become. You can rarely see such spontaneous outpouring of sheer joy and unrestrained merry-making as you can see watching the crowd celebrate Obama’s victory.

You look at the sparkling faces of black crowd that gave the unmistakable feeling of joy and happiness, with tears streaming down their faces. Reverend Jesse Jackson—the civil rights leader and close confidant of Martin Luther King—was seen as quietly weeping, seeing Obama at the victory stage, which gave the impression that Jackson and most blacks had never expected this to happen in their own lifetime—election of a black President! Underlying the feeling of relief and joy for the black community was the realization as if a heavy burden had been lifted off their shoulders, which had oppressed them for generations.

The next morning, November 5, *The Washington Post* printed a cartoon on its editorial page showing an Obama-like figure, briefcase in hand, making way to The White House door. At the top, the cartoon read: “*We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.*” Cartoon’s bottom printed the following: “*Ratified November 4, 2008.*” The cartoon succinctly summarized the American dilemma since the creation of the Republic in 1776 that proclaimed the self-evident truth of equal treatment for all but this had excluded the blacks.

Now all eyes are on January 20, 2009—when the President-elect Obama will be sworn-in to serve as President for the next four years. Until then he will be busy with getting his team together, especially his Cabinet, all of whom are chosen from outside the legislature, unlike in a parliamentary system—like in Nepal—in which Ministers must be members of parliament.

After taking office, the first major issue that President Obama will encounter is righting the economy which has been in a free-fall since September and the bottom is not reached yet. Another issue will be the on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which the American public wants to get settled quickly. Then there will be the problem of fighting Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, which has plagued Bush’s presidency since its early years, weakened the US economy, and sometime heavy-handed approach to contain it has tarnished America’s image overseas.

Obama will have no time for a honeymoon with Congress, usually a span of first 100 days after swearing-in. He will have to get to work from day one and show quick progress—to keep at bay his many opponents who see Obama phenomenon as premature and outlandish.

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