

The 2008 U.S. Election: Past and Prologue

By Monroe Newman

Monroe Newman is a professor Emeritus of Economics, Pennsylvania State University

Go back 50 years. If someone suggested that the candidates of a major American party for the highest offices in the land would be a bi-racial African-American and a Roman Catholic, the person's sanity would have been questioned. Forecast that they would win and the questions would have been replaced by a certainty.

Yet that is what has happened, an event that gives insight into the evolving U.S. and foresight into implications for the future.

It might be said that too much should not be read into the election results. A shift in national leadership might have been preordained by a disastrous presidency, unpopular and seemingly endless wars, widening income disparities, financial catastrophe, economic weakness, international disrepute and gross disconnects between principles and actions.

Clearly, all this undoubtedly advantaged Barack Obama. But do they explain such signal successes as receiving \$150 million in voluntary contributions in a single month? (During the entire multi-month election period, no one was allowed to give more than a total of \$2,300). Or receiving 3 million separate donations from Internet solicitations? Or 100,000 people peaceably gathering and dispersing to hear a single campaign speech? Or not only receiving a majority of all votes but also getting a higher percentage of the votes of whites than either of the two preceding Democratic candidates? I think not, particularly in view of the campaign against him.

The opposition campaign tried to build on some of the worst sentiments in American society. It tried to appeal to racism, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, religious bias, geographic and

urban-rural differences. It tried to equate policy disagreements with lack of patriotism. It besmirched the morality of those who differ on social issues. And it failed.

Implication: The old fears and ways no longer persuade. Dogmatic domestic and international ideological imperialism was defeated. Will the new administration and the country always live up to all their ambitions? Probably not. Imperfection is a human trait. But the election gives notice that aims, purposes, approaches and techniques are all likely to be markedly different.

For the rest of the world, there are two important implications. First, just as the U.S. has re-cast itself, others need to re-cast their perceptions of the country and its view of its role in the world. The old assumptions and presumptions should, at least, be examined. For some of them, modification or revision may well be necessary. Others need to be ready to change because the U.S. has changed.

Secondly, if the outcome in the U.S. is a harbinger of changing attitudes elsewhere, appeals to nasty attitudes towards others are losing their persuasiveness. Emphasizing differences of race, religion, nationality, gender, way of life may no longer be building blocks to social and political power. Inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness may be the effective route.

In 50 years the U.S. has transformed its fundamental attitudes and behaviors toward its fellow citizens. Something worth emulating?