

How was President Obama's victory perceived by the rest of the world? How did Europe in particular react? How will the election of Obama affect US global strategy? Dr. Patrick Chamorel, an expert on US-European relations and resident scholar at Stanford-in-Washington, considers the international implications of the President Barack Obama.

A Scholarly Perspective: Global Responses to the 2008 US Elections

Dr. Patrick Chamorel



Obama supporter in Tanzania

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The level of media coverage and popular interest in the 2008 US presidential election was unprecedented—not just in the United States, but throughout the world. The high drama of the campaign and the prospect of electing the first female or African-American president certainly played a role. But so did the heightened sense among non-Americans that, as a result of Bush's foreign policy, they had a direct stake in the US presidential election.

Although unusual, the overwhelming and enthusiastic support for Obama and the expectations raised by his victory overseas are not without explanation. Obama appeared as the anti-Bush: he criticized the Iraq war from the start, pledged the withdrawal of US troops and extolled the virtues of international cooperation. The appeal outside America's borders of a biracial intellectual whose father was from Kenya and who was raised in multicultural

Hawaii and Islamist Indonesia clearly outshone the parochial Texan weary of the outside world and infused with a sense of American superior strength and virtue. As a consequence of Obama's victory and the campaign itself, America's image as a strong grassroots democracy has been restored and enriched by its racial tolerance. The contrast could not be more striking with the impression left in the aftermath of the Bush re-election four years ago of an increasingly nationalist and militaristic American society, where even the countervailing power of the media had broken down.

Of course, not all countries and regions in the world jumped onto the Obama bandwagon. In parts of Asia, McCain was the preferred candidate, where he was perceived as the ultimate guarantor of their national security and global free trade. India, for example, values

the close strategic relationship it has forged with the US during the Bush administration. Faced with a rising and threatening China, Japan is again acutely aware of its reliance on US security commitments. Several central Asian republics transformed themselves into key allies of Bush's "War on Terror." In addition to having benefitted from quasi-unconditional support from the Bush administration, Israel was inclined to trust a hardliner such as McCain over an inexperienced Obama, whose support for Israel was still questioned at the outset of the campaign. A few European countries, most notably Poland, were also favorably disposed towards McCain. The former members of the Communist bloc are grateful to Bush for pursuing Bill Clinton's expansion of NATO, and valued McCain's experience on national security, especially his spontaneous and muscular reaction to Russia's attempted invasion of Georgia in the summer of 2008.

By contrast, West Europeans, who have been the leading critics of the Bush presidency, embraced Obama with levels of popular support hovering above 80 if not 90 percent, including in countries that had officially backed the invasion of Iraq. It did not seem to matter that McCain was well-known in Europe, viewed as knowledgeable on European affairs and as a genuine Atlanticist. As in the US, McCain failed to represent a clean break with the Bush administration, most notably on the Iraq war, but in other areas as well. Offsetting his image as a centrist, McCain's choice to put Sarah Palin on the ticket reminded Europeans of their alienation from the Republican Party's conservative culture. Moreover, in parliamentary Europe, citizens conceive of political change as the alternation between the incumbent and the opposition party or coalition (expectations in France's presidential elections can be different, as evidenced by Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in 2007). In addition, European political leaders understood that by voicing their support for a popular Obama, they could score political points at home, especially among alienated minority constituencies.

There is no doubt that Obama's election has created a valuable reservoir of good will toward the US around

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the world. At the same time, unrealistic (and possibly unmanageable) expectations have been raised in the US and abroad. The world's enthusiasm for Obama is largely the projection of an ideal America whose interests and values can and will be reconciled with those of other nations. Those who hold the image of Obama as a "citizen of the world" and an "outsider in his own country" face inevitable disappointment when he asserts American interests which are bound to occasionally clash with those of other nations. It is not far-fetched to envision recurring disagreements on Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Conversely, Americans should not believe that goodwill around the world will remain at its current level. Closer cooperation with the US will require more, not less, from America's allies. Differences with an unpopular Bush administration made it convenient for many European leaders to stay away from risky global commitments. With Obama in the White House, they have nowhere to hide and few excuses. If Europeans want American elites and public opinion to favor multilateralism, they will have to show that it can concretely serve US interests. On Afghanistan, for example, where European citizens favor a withdrawal of their troops, the political price for cooperating with US policy may be too high. While welcoming the Obama presidency, America's allies do not expect a smooth ride.

In addition to foreign affairs, the election of an African-American to the White House may have some ripple effects on the domestic politics of other countries, including in Western Europe where governments have been wrestling with the integration of racial and religious immigrant minorities into the broader society. According to observers, in some of these alienated communities, Obama's election has been interpreted essentially as the victory of Black America over the white majority and "the establishment." While it is true that Obama owes much to the civil rights movement, his own itinerary was distinct from it and his message is one of unity and moderation. Obama's election is unlikely to contribute even marginally to the political radicalization of minorities in Western Europe. However, it helps European political leaders make their case for the importance of education, hard work, and respect for the law, and at the same time puts pressure on them to expand anti-discrimination policies. In the future, European voters may be more open to the idea of electing a non-white leader. American critics are right to point to the fact that few Obama enthusiasts in Europe would be ready to vote for a minority as their leader. But then again, there is no European equivalent of the African-American journey in the United States. §