

## US Primaries 2008: A Message for Change

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The last seven years of President George W. Bush's presidency have been the most controversial that have galvanized world opinion about United States of America. His presidency has resulted in such devastating acts as 'the war on terror', invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the looming prospects of war on Iran, the right of pre-emptive strikes and hot pursuits with no regard to sovereignty of even the so-called allies and friends, the Patriotic Act and 'water boarding'. On the domestic side, there are huge question marks on the declining US economy, healthcare, real estate and climate change. Small wonder then that the eyes of the world are riveted on the election fever in the US that is taking a dramatic turn in the race for the presidency as Americans grapple with the revolutionary idea of having the first ever of either an African-American or a woman as their commander-in-chief.

The race for that position in the United States passes through four steps. Step one includes the Primaries and Caucuses where members of a party get to vote for the candidate that will represent their party in the upcoming general election. Step two is based on the National Conventions, where at the end of the primaries and caucuses, each party holds a national convention to finalise the selection of one Presidential nominee. During this time, each Presidential candidate chooses a running-mate (or Vice-Presidential candidate). Step three involves the General (or Popular) Election. With each party represented by one candidate, the general election process begins. Candidates campaign throughout the country in an attempt to win the support of voters. Finally, in November, the people vote for one candidate. When a person casts a vote in the general election, they are not voting directly for an individual Presidential candidate. Instead, voters in each state actually cast their vote for a group of people, known as electors. These electors are part of the Electoral College and are supposed to vote for their state's preferred candidate. This is where the fourth step comes in — called the Electoral College. In the Electoral College system, each state gets a certain number of electors, based on each state's total number of representation in Congress. Each elector gets one electoral vote. For example, a large state like California gets 54 electoral votes, while Rhode Island gets only four. All together, there are 538 Electoral votes. In December (following the general election), the electors cast their votes. When the votes are counted on January 6th, the Presidential candidate that gets more than half (270) wins the election. The President-elect and Vice President-elect take the oath of office and are inaugurated two weeks later, on January 20th.

The sprint for the presidential nomination campaign for elections scheduled for November 4, 2008, began in 2007. The campaign itself was divided into four phases: the pre-primary, January, Super Tuesday, and the spring. The pre-primary threw up a number of 'front runners' from both the Republican and the Democrat Parties. The pre-primary campaign saw the Democrats field eight candidates: Barack Obama, John Edwards, Hillary R. Clinton, Bill Richardson and Joseph Biden, Dennis Kucinich, Christopher Dodd, and Mike Gravel. The Republicans put out an equal number: Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, Duncan Hunter, John McCain, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, Fred Thompson, and John Cox. The elections in November 2008 will be the 56th consecutive quadrennial election for the next president and vice president in the US. With an clear mood among the public for a change in the White House, it became clear that as with the three most recent presidential administrations featuring an outgoing two-term president, that of Eisenhower, Reagan, and Clinton, the incumbent vice president will not be running for president.

### **Nomination Procedures**

Nomination procedures in the United States are unlike those of most other democratic systems. The caucuses primary election system in the strict sense, often called the direct primary election system, is used only in the US. The primary elections in the states usually determine which candidates for president will be supported by a particular state at the national convention of each political party. The winning candidate must collect a majority of committed delegates to win their party's nomination. A Democratic candidate needs 2,025 delegates to secure the nomination, while for the Republicans, the winning post has been set at 1,191. The Democrats award their delegates through proportional representation, not

winner takes all. The Republicans on the other hand award all their GOP delegates to the candidate who wins the state-wide vote. Delegates to the national party conventions are selected through direct primary elections, state caucuses, and state conventions. The process continues June 2008, but in the previous cycles, the Democratic and Republican candidates were chosen by the March primaries. Both parties have now adopted rules to prevent early primaries and have acted to strip some or all delegates from states, most notably Florida and Michigan that have disobeyed. The biggest prizes among the Democratic states are California (370 delegates), New York (232) and Illinois (153). The wild card for the Democrats involves the superdelegates, nearly 800 elected officials and members of the Democratic National Committee. They are free to support any candidate they choose at the national convention, regardless of the outcome of the primaries.

The 2008 dates leading up to 'Super Tuesday' were scheduled as follows:

- January 3 – Iowa caucus
- January 5 – Republican Wyoming caucus
- January 8 – New Hampshire primary
- January 15 – Michigan primary
- January 19 – Nevada caucus / Republican South Carolina primary
- January 26 – Florida primary
- February 1 – Republican Maine caucus
- February 5 – Super Tuesday: Primaries/caucuses for both parties in 19 states, plus three Democratic-only caucuses and two Republican-only primaries.

### **Results of 2008 Primaries**

The primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire set the tone of the nation as the first states who voted in the first two weeks of the year. During the last quarter of 2007, the media reports in the US listed Obama, Edwards, Hillary, Richardson and Biden as leading in polls and fundraising and well ahead of the other major Democratic candidates, while Huckabee, Romney, Thompson, McCain, Paul and Giuliani were christened as the Republican front runner.

The Republican and Democratic presidential contests began diverging in February 2008 after 'Super Tuesday', leaving the Democrats facing a long and potentially divisive nomination battle and the Republicans closer to an opportunity to put aside deep internal divisions and rally around a nominee. The differing situations for the Republicans and Democrats have clear implications for both parties as they begin to move from the nomination battle toward the general election.

On the Democrat side, after the primaries in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia on February 12, 2008, Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama seem likely to continue their state-by-state struggle as they move into the primaries in Ohio and Texas in March 2008. Though Mrs. Clinton has claimed the formidable prize of California her advisers increasingly believe that, after a series of losses, she has been boxed into a must-win position in the Ohio and Texas primaries on March 4. She has now begun reassuring anxious donors and superdelegates that the nomination is not slipping away from her.

According to the latest New York Times/CBS News Poll (February 26, 2008), in the past two months, Senator Barack Obama has built a commanding coalition among Democratic voters, with especially strong support among men, and is now viewed by most Democrats as the candidate best able to beat Senator John McCain in the general election. After 40 Democratic primaries and caucuses, capped by a winning streak in 11 contests, Mr. Obama has made substantial gains across most major demographic groups in the Democratic Party, including men and women, liberals and moderates, higher and lower income voters, and those with and without college degrees. But while he has a strong edge among Democratic voters on his ability to unite and inspire the country, Senator Hillary Clinton is still viewed by more Democrats as prepared for the job of president. But Mr. Obama's clear lead in delegates allocated

by the votes in nominating contests is one of a number of challenges facing Clinton after a string of defeats in which Mr. Obama not only ran up big popular vote margins but also made inroads among the types of voters she had most been counting on, including women and lower-income people.

As of March 2008, Obama leads Hillary by more than 90 delegates; a small but significant advantage that Democrats said would be difficult for Mrs. Clinton to make up in the remaining contests in the presidential nomination battle. Neither candidate is expected to win the 2,025 pledged delegates needed to claim the nomination by the time the voting ends in June 2008. But Mr. Obama's campaign has begun making a case in earnest that if he maintained his edge in delegates won in primaries and caucuses, he would have the strongest claim to the backing of the 796 elected Democrats and party leaders known as superdelegates who are free to vote as they choose and who now stand to determine the outcome. The sheer consistency of Mr. Obama's victories since January 2008 certainly suggests that many Democratic voters have gotten past whatever reservations they might have had about his electability or his qualifications to be president.

On the Republican side, Senator John McCain's victories in Virginia, the District of Columbia and Maryland have virtually eliminated any threat that Mr. Huckabee might have posed to Mr. McCain's status as his party's all but certain nominee. Although Mr. Huckabee got a boost from conservative and evangelical Christian voters in Virginia, but not enough to overcome support among moderates and non-evangelical Christians for Mr. McCain. But after months of disarray, Republicans seemed closer to coalescing around Senator John McCain of Arizona. As Mr. McCain logged victories in populous states, including California, and added more delegates to his count, he moved nearer his goal of wrapping up his competition with Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas. Mr. Huckabee's relatively strong showing has injected a small note of uncertainty into the Republican race, and potentially delayed the day when Mr. McCain would have the stage to himself. But Mr. Huckabee appeared to drain votes primarily away from Mr. Romney.

### **Electoral Issues of Concern in 2008**

In the 2008 primary races, Democrats are focusing on troop withdrawal from Iraq and health care issues, while Republicans are highlighting their tough stances on immigration and national security. The economy was ranked most often as the top issue facing the nation, followed by the war in Iraq and health care. There were signs that both Democratic camps were growing polarised; only half of the voters said they would be satisfied if either candidate became the nominee.

Polls in the United States show that Americans split their support among many presidential candidates. However, these same polls indicate there is one thing on which many Americans agree: It is time for a change. A CBS News/New York Times poll released in December 2007 found that 71% of Americans think their country is on the wrong track. Approval ratings for both the president and Congress continue to be low. The poll also showed that a majority of Americans think the economy is worsening.

These factors indicate that Americans are looking for a leader who can change the direction in which the country is heading. According to NBC News Political Director, Chuck Todd, voters "desperately want change, people are upset; they are worried about America's role in the world." Nevertheless, Chuck who was talking with journalists in Washington at the Foreign Press Centre on December 10, 2007 was also of the opinion that when Americans say they want change, they generally mean they are looking for a different style of leadership and governing. It does not necessarily mean they want policies to change drastically. The discussion gave an interesting insight into the American mindset, and it was clear from its content that Americans still are interested in leaders with political experience, and even the candidates who campaign on their ability to bring new ideas to the table have to prove that they have enough experience — particularly on foreign affairs. When voters think about a candidate's experience, they think of that person as "commander in chief, world leader, leader of the free world." This desire for change might explain the recent rise of two candidates who do not have much national political experience — Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mike Huckabee.

### **Primaries 2008 – The Message**

Since the beginning of his campaign, first-term Illinois Senator Barack Obama has said he seeks to bring change to Washington, while New York Senator and former first lady Hillary Clinton has been emphasising her experience. Obama's focus on change is evident on the campaign trail. Since October 2007, at campaign events before thousands of people and in talk shows such as Oprah Winfrey, signs reading "change we can believe in" have adorned the stages.

For Hillary Clinton, who had been changing her message quite frequently, a new campaign ad now emphasises that electing Hillary Clinton would bring "a new beginning", desperately trying according to political analysts in Washington, "to get some of that change energy that Obama has been basically locking up." A relative newcomer to the political scene, Obama has to show that he has the experience to lead. And Obama's win at the primaries in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia seems to suggest that he has been able to convince voters that he has just enough experience to bring about that change. It seems that he's just a step away from being the Democratic nominee. It all really depends whether the Americans are ready for a 'black man' in the 'White House' or would rather prefer to have a 'white woman' in the 'White House'.

While the Democrats are especially eager for change, the Republicans are seeking this as well. However, CBS News/New York Times polls indicate that Republicans still favour a candidate with experience over one with new ideas, but many Republicans are also interested in seeing the country take a new direction. This might be one of the reasons that relatively unknown Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee has gone from a long-shot candidate to being the third runner up behind McCain and Romney. It is to be noted that other Republican candidates have spent much of their time on the campaign trail proving that they share some of the same traditional Republican values that President Bush holds. Huckabee, meanwhile, has been campaigning as an anti-Washington candidate, and looking at the Republican candidates, the only one that is even coming close to tapping into the change atmosphere inside the Republican Party.

All early indications are that voters in the US are rejecting being pigeonholed into one group or another and are asking for new thinking. Whoever is elected the new President, they will own their office to a pledge for radical change. The larger question not only for the Americans, but also for both friends and foes of the United States is, whether a shake-up is coming, and will it make a difference in the way politics is done in Washington?