

Leading Scholars Weigh the Meaning of the 2008 Presidential and Congressional Elections

By Jodi Weisberg

With the election just around the corner, chances are you've picked a candidate. But will this election really make a difference? After all, war, energy, the environment, healthcare, and the economy have always been issues. So what is really at stake at this moment in history?

The U.S. Supreme Court for one. According to Paul Bender, a Constitutional scholar and professor of law at Arizona State University, the composition of the U.S. Supreme Court is arguably one of the most important reasons to vote.

"This election could have the biggest impact on the Court since 1932. Truly, the future of the Court is at issue here," he says.

According to Bender, the next president may have one and possibly three opportunities to make appointments to the Court. Currently, there are four very conservative judges—Alito, Thomas, Scalia, and Roberts—and four moderately liberal justices—Stevens, Ginsburg, Souter, and Breyer. Justice Anthony Kennedy is often the swing vote.

It is likely that Stevens, now age 88, will retire soon; Ginsburg, who is 75, has battled cancer; and Souter would like to return home to New Hampshire.

"If even one judge were to leave and be replaced by a conservative, the Court would change in a dramatic way," says Bender. "If McCain is elected, he has already says he'd appoint a conservative. If Obama is elected, nothing would really change, because he would appoint similar people, and you really wouldn't notice a difference."

U.S. Supreme Court decisions on issues such as abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, gender discrimination, and criminal protections for defendants will have a major impact for generations to come.

In sound bites, debates, and town hall meetings, each candidate has addressed the war, the economy, energy costs, and the environment. Voters have an idea of each one's plans and agendas, although the candidates have been less forthcoming about specific details.

Given the ominous nature of war, energy, and the economy, this could be viewed as a very somber time for America. However, Earl Mitchell, Professor Emeritus at Oklahoma State University, remains an optimist.

"I see problems being solved because people want to do what is good and right," he says. "There is a new positive air, and changes are happening. I think these attitudinal changes will continue no matter who the president is."

As a biochemist, Mitchell is especially interested in stem cell research and scientific policies. He believes the president can influence these areas and says the 1950s and '60s were the "golden years" of good science policy. It was a time of growth and robust funding for scientific research, education, and NASA. But for the past 25 years, a different approach has been the norm.

"Economic development has been a bad thing for science because the government won't fund you if your project won't make money," says Mitchell. "The purpose of



Paul Bender, JD

scientific policy and research should be to promote the common good, not to make money for the private sector.”

Although optimistic, Mitchell is realistic about the entrenched system of lobbyists. “That won’t change,” he says. “What has to change are the ethics. I believe the president can influence the ethics, and that could go a long way in how business is conducted at all levels of government.”

The president does have a great deal of independent authority, according to Ed Dorn, former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration.

“Bush has extended this power through signing statements, which is unprecedented,” he says. “Bush has used this more than any other president in history, but it was never challenged in the courts.”

For Dorn, the escalating deficit, which he estimates could be \$660 billion in 2009, is a major issue.

“Are we going to continue to borrow money from China and Saudi Arabia or will we try to balance the budget?” he asks. “What do you focus on to accomplish this? Certainly the defense budget for one,” he says.

“No matter who becomes president, we will begin to withdraw forces from Iraq within the next two to three years. The consensus is that we will have to make a bigger investment in Afghanistan, both militarily and with assistance for economic development and training.”

For ASU economist Barbara Robles, the economy is at a “tipping point” if we are to have a better future.

“The Republican vision is to maintain the type of economy and political power we have had since World War II. This status quo is simply unsustainable,” she says. “The Democratic vision recognizes we have to do things differently at home and abroad. The crucial issue is how they will galvanize the country to produce new ideas.”



Barbara Robles, Ph.D.

Taking a hard look at our economic policies, both foreign and domestic, is imperative.

“Our economic policies support and benefit the Wal-Marts of the world, and as a result, you end up with a monopoly,” she says. “We need reform capitalism for a more equitable distribution of resources, and we need regulations to support the players. After all, our economy is only as good as the people and players in it.”

A sound economic policy is certainly essential, but Ronald Walters, a professor at the University of Maryland, says a philosophical shift is also warranted.

“The Democrats believe government has to have more of a say so in correcting people’s problems,” says Walters. “The Republicans believe government should not have much of a role in dealing with those problems.”

Walters says that the current administration failed to regulate the banking industry, resulting in the foreclosure crisis. He cites Hurricane Katrina, sub-prime mortgages, business debacles such as Enron, and energy prices as other failures.

“I think the Republicans want the private sector instead of the government to solve these problems,” he says. “But that isn’t always the best path to take.”

When thinking about election outcomes, Walters looks at the demographics.

“Traditionally about 60 percent of Asians, 65 percent of Hispanics, and 90 percent of Blacks vote Democratic,” he says. “I think Obama could win Virginia and North or South Carolina because of the large numbers of Blacks who live there. Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico have large numbers of Hispanics, so there could be a landslide for Obama.”



Brent Chrite, Ph.D.

Brent Chrite, associate dean of the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona, is not overly impressed with the rhetoric of either candidate on the issue of global relations.

“The world is as complex and dangerous as it’s ever been,” he says. “We need more nuanced and sophisticated views to deal with the world. The ‘for us or against us’ mentality is dangerous and wrong. How credible is the experience of Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld when you look at the results?”

Recognizing the way Congress operates, with its system of lobbyists, deal making, and strange bedfellows, Chrite says managing Congress will be a leadership issue for the next president.

“There is a national conflict between fiscal discipline, transparent leadership, and getting things done,” he says. “You can’t accomplish this without new enhanced revenue streams and cost cutting. While both candidates are authentic people, both still pander to special interests.”

Veteran politician Mickey Edwards served 16 years in Congress (1977-1993) representing the 5th District of Oklahoma and has taught at Harvard, Georgetown, and Princeton, where he is currently a lecturer at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He says this election provides the greatest contrast between any two candidates in recent history.

“You have the youngest and the oldest vying for the office. You have Obama, who comes more from the private sector, contrasted with McCain, who has been in public office for decades,” he says.

Edwards is certain of one thing, and that is the Democrats will keep control of Congress, possibly even increasing their number of seats.

“If Obama wins, the tendency is for Congress to support their party president. If McCain wins, he may have a more difficult time with his agenda,” Edwards says.

Whatever your political persuasion, this has shaped up to be a pivotal election. It is also historic. After all, it is the first time a Black has run for the office of president and beaten a woman to do it.

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We welcome your comments on this article. Please email them to jweisberg@qwest.net. This article appears in the 2008 edition of the Boardroom Monitor. Ms. Weisberg earned a BA and an MS in English from University of Texas at Austin and a JD from University of Arizona College of Law.