

Extra Feature Story

High Voter Turnout Helps Barack Obama Win Presidency

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After a campaign that is destined to redefine American politics, Sen. Barack Obama solidly won the U.S. presidency Tuesday, making him the country's first black leader.

Obama stressed the importance of the moment to about 70,000 supporters during an outdoor rally in Chicago's Grant Park, telling them that "change has come."

"This is our moment. This is our time... to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth -- that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: yes we can," Obama told the electrified crowd late Tuesday.

Voter concerns about the unstable U.S. economy and dissatisfaction with the presidency of George W. Bush helped Obama to victory. He won battleground states such as Florida, Ohio, Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia, which were all won by Bush in the last presidential election.

A historic moment

Beyond the political shift from eight years of Republican power to the Democratic Party, Obama also acknowledged the historic nature of his election.

"If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer," Obama said.

The massive crowd gathered in Chicago's Grant Park on election night erupted when the media projected Obama to win the presidency.

"There's a reverence that's taken effect among the thousands of people here," NewsHour Senior Correspondent Judy Woodruff reported from Chicago. "It's a moment of awe. People here know they're witnessing history... I don't think I've seen anything like this."

Within moments of the media projection for Obama, his Republican opponent, Arizona Sen. John McCain, congratulated Obama and conceded the race.

"The American people have spoken and spoken clearly," McCain told a crowd of supporters in Arizona. "This is an historic election and I recognize the significance it has for African-Americans and the special pride that must be theirs tonight," McCain said.

Analysts were quick to agree with the Republican's assessment.

"Americans will look at their country differently tomorrow," NewsHour analyst Mark Shields said Tuesday night.

World response

The U.S. presidential election has been closely watched around the world. Obama has been a popular figure in many countries and celebrations broke out on news of his victory everywhere from Europe to his late father's home of Kenya.

"What an inspiration. He is the first truly global U.S. president the world has ever had," Pracha Kanjananont,

a 29-year-old Thai sitting at a Starbucks in Bangkok told the British paper The Times.

"He had an Asian childhood, African parentage and has a Middle Eastern name. He is a truly global president."

World leaders rushed to congratulate Obama on Wednesday.

"At a time when we must face huge challenges together, your election has raised enormous hope in France, in Europe and beyond," French President Nicolas Sarkozy said, reported BBC News.

In London, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said, "Barack Obama ran an inspirational campaign, energizing politics with his progressive values and his vision for the future."

Historian Richard Norton Smith told the NewsHour Obama's election sends a strong message to the world. "In a larger sense, it would also be an extraordinary ... announcement to the rest of the world. Don't write us off. Don't pigeon-hole the United States," he said.

"How many other Democratic societies around the world are capable of doing this themselves?"

Voter turnout

It was a diverse electorate that supplied the historic change. Between 126.5 million and 128.5 million votes were cast this year, according to Curtis Gans, director of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate, reported the Wall Street Journal.

Earlier projections had that number higher and some thought the rate of voter turn-out could surpass the record 62.5 percent turnout for the 1968 election. Gans estimate puts the rate at between 60.7 percent and 61.7 percent. A lower turn-out of Republican voters could be the reason, Gans said.

While it may not have broken the 1968 record, the 2008 election will go down in history regardless.

"In 50 years when people write textbooks this will be the first page of a chapter," New York Times columnist David Brooks said after Obama's address. "A chapter ended and a chapter of some sort is beginning."

-- **Compiled from wire reports and other news sources**

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