

Superpower America: An American Parties Scholar Watches the 2008 Election from Abroad”

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Introduction

In 2008, I had the privilege of serving as a Fulbright Distinguished Scholar to the United Kingdom. I spent my time as a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Sussex in Brighton. In these capacities I had the opportunity to give a number of talks about the US elections throughout the United Kingdom, in Greece, and in Denmark. I also had occasion to interact with press representatives from a number of European nations and Canada. Watching the US elections from abroad taught me that our European allies have a rather poorly formed and incomplete view of the dynamics of US politics on several levels. They are far more ignorant of the structural dynamics of our system (separation of powers, federalism) than we believe and attribute qualities to our political parties that we probably would not. In this paper, I will explore the dimensions of Europe's view of our political system and speculate on the implications this may have for the future of Euro-American relations.

Systemic Views

Every audience I addressed seemed not to understand why I was talking about the probable composition of the Congress after the 2008 elections. While they clearly knew the US has a presidential system, it was nearly incomprehensible to them that members of Congress would not reflect the president's party and would not support the president's program in every circumstance. In Great Britain in particular, since MPs are elected in constituencies, though assigned to run there by the party organization (and in many cases, the MPs are not resident in their constituency until after they are elected), they assume that the US Congress operates in pretty much the same manner. After all, both Congress and Parliament have first past the post electoral systems. Why, then, should a speaker like me focus on the Congress they wanted to

know? Only at the American Embassy in London, where I was allowed to focus exclusively on the 2008 congressional elections, did the audience of academics who taught American politics in British universities seem tolerant of my agenda.

Although there is devolution in the UK, which resembles federalism in the US, and federal systems in Germany and Switzerland, for the most part there is little familiarity with the concept of American federalism or its consequences. One of the myths about America's world power is that it is a nation that works with one voice and one set of policies. Most Brits are surprised to learn that a great deal of American domestic policy is formulated at the state level. Those who do understand it are consistently baffled by the disparate results that federalism produces – they prefer their own unified, consistent policy outcomes, whether they disagree with them or not.

The lack of familiarity with our institutional arrangements leads the British to have a distorted view of our political party system as well. Again, they imagine the Democratic party as more liberal than it is and they believe the Republican party to be more conservative than it is. The most puzzling dimension of our party system for the Brits is that our two major parties seem to cleave importantly on social issues. While one can argue that Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats might champion some issues that cross the line of being 'social issues,' all would uniformly admit that the major social issues that are debated in the US – abortion, gay marriage, religion – are nearly absent in the UK party system. So in looking to the US, both foreign policy positions and the global economic crisis guided the support for Obama by both Labour and Conservative leaders in the UK. While support from Labour's Gordon Brown seemed natural, Conservative leader David Cameron told the *Financial Times*, "In these difficult times people everywhere are crying out for change...Barack Obama is the first of a new

generation of leaders who will deliver it - he has my whole-hearted congratulations.”(Parker 2008) The universal support for the Democrats and their candidate was echoed in the views of average citizens as well. In early July of 2008, *The Guardian* commissioned a poll asking the British public “You may have seen or heard that John McCain and Barack Obama are set to be the candidates in the American Presidential elections which will take place in November. As far as you are aware, which one of them do you think would make the better President of the United States?” 53 percent of Brits preferred Obama, 11 percent McCain, and 36 percent had no preference. (Glover, Julian and Ewan MacAskill 2008)

Obama-mania

It’s really no secret that Europe embraced Obama even before he secured the nomination. There is the infamous story of his rally in Berlin where a reported 200,000 people turned out to see him.(Potter and Star 2008, A01) Obama’s popularity stems from a number of factors. First, and most obvious, he is not George Bush. Opposition to Bush’s foreign policy was nearly uniform in Europe as was frustration with some of Bush’s social policies. Second, Obama is black. While Europeans certainly have their issues with race and ethnicity, a black president reinforced the idea of an open, progressive America. When I attended a conference in Berlin in March of 2009, one of the commentators made sure to point out that while the Berlin visit was “crowded” it was not necessarily “krauted,” meaning that the audience was not exclusively German, but instead a mixture of Europeans as this was Obama’s only public event in Europe. This did not mean Germans had a negative view of Obama, rather that there was nothing about his visit that was specifically German in appeal.

Sales of Obama's books

The European fascination with Barack Obama is based in far greater understanding of the man than Americans might realize. It seems odd that Europeans are more likely to have read one or both of Obama's books than Americans – an idea I had based on numerous encounters both abroad and at home – but it turns out this impression is backed by empirical evidence in the form of sales of Obama's books. Both were released in the United Kingdom in 2008. *Dreams from my Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* managed to occupy respectively the number 2 and 6 spots on the best selling non-fiction paperback books of 2008, with *Dreams from my Father* selling 257,030 copies and *The Audacity of Hope* selling 207,320.(The Sunday Times)

In the USA, where, obviously Obama has been a notable public figure for much longer, Obama's books also sold well. In 2008 *Dreams from my Father* (originally 1995, re-released 2004) sold 680,000 copies whereas *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) sold 764,000 copies.(Jones 2009) The table below shows that, although in 2008 three times the number of books were sold in the US than in the UK, because of the UK's significantly smaller population, almost twice as many books per capita were sold in the UK than in the USA.

<u>2008 Sales</u>							
	<i>Dreams from My Father</i>	<i>The Audacity of Hope</i>	<i>Combined</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>DFMF per capita sales</i>	<i>TAOH per capita sales</i>	<i>Combined per capita</i>
UK	257,030	207,320	464,350	61,113,205 ¹	1 in 237	1 in 294	1 in 132
USA	680,000	764,000	1,444,000	306,960,927 ²	1 in 451	1 in 402	1 in 213

Book sales continued strongly in the UK well into 2009: for the first quarter of 2009 Obama's book sales revenue amounted to almost £2 million.(Stone 2009) *The Audacity of Hope* exited the top 10 after the 3 May after having sold 357,845 copies and having spent 24 weeks in the top 10; at this point, *Dreams from my Father* was still holding the number 2 spot in the paperback non-fiction chart with sales amounting to 519,235.(The Sunday Times, 38-38) *Dreams from my Father* finally exited the top 10 in July after 38 weeks and 585,950 copies sold with combined book sales now approaching 1 million.(The Sunday Times, 36-36)

Obama's books have certainly captured the imagination of the British public with Obama managing to scoop the Biography of the Year award at the British Book Awards for *Dreams from my Father*, while narrowly missing out on the prestigious Best Author award for *The Audacity of Hope*.(BBC News, 1)

¹ CIA - The World Factbook, "The United Kingdom", ([here](#)), July 2009 estimate

² US Census Bureau, "US Population Clock", ([here](#)), accessed 20 July 2009

Sarah Palin and John McCain

The surprise I had about Sarah Palin's vice presidential nomination in the US was nothing compared with my surprise at the coverage she received in the United Kingdom. The coverage was extensive and very detailed – from her children, her husband, her sister's divorce and its implications for potentially inappropriate conduct in office, her image as a hunter – all were recounted in the British press, down to a quiz. (Cashmore 2008, 14) For fairly obvious reasons, Palin made for a better news story than John McCain, with the result that European coverage seemed to focus much more on her than him. I found myself in the curious position of defending John McCain to most Europeans.

Press coverage of the presidential candidates' views

For all the coverage of the US presidential campaign in Europe, surprisingly little of it was issue-based. I employed a British student to help me find coverage of the two presidential candidates, and by extension the US political parties, to see how they were portrayed. There was some coverage of the support for the National Health Service (NHS) by Obama and its opposition by McCain. Otherwise, there was very little content coverage of policy positions. In foreign affairs, most press coverage just before the election focused on Afghanistan. While there seemed widespread relief that a new American administration would take a different position on Iraq, there was a bit more nervousness that Americans would (Organ Grinder Blog) step up efforts in Afghanistan, regardless of who was elected. Obama's Berlin speech contained an explicit call to European allies not to demure in providing help in Afghanistan, claiming that western allies must stay in order to prevent terrorism. However, the European press's preference for Obama seems very much rooted in the notion of 'change' for change's sake. Interestingly,

it's the aftermath of the Obama victory that provokes the most thought in the British public in particular.

Election night celebrations, coverage

The American election returns were covered live by the BBC and ITV1. The BBC had 1.3 million viewers and ITV1 had 300,000. The BBC sent correspondents to Washington and had well-known political presenter (news show host) Jeremy Paxton conduct interviews and host coverage all night. Meanwhile, all night election watching parties were taking place all over London and the far reaches of the United Kingdom. The most 'famous' party was at the American Embassy in London (understandably) where between 1,500 and 2,000 people were in attendance (including yours truly). (Randhawa and Wilson 2008, 8) What was more significant was the number of parties occurring outside of London. Students on my campus one hour south of London convinced the campus pub to stay open all night so they could watch the returns. Many similar events were scheduled nationwide, to the point where I did an interview with a journalist from the Economist about the phenomena. Apparently, Brits hardly took notice in the elections of 2000 and 2004.

The Immediate Aftermath: Stories of Diversity in UK Politics

The outcome of the election was greeted with joy, relief and disbelief that Americans were actually 'cool' enough to vote for a candidate as progressive as Obama appeared to them. Talk turned immediately to the potential for a fresh face like Obama's to emerge on the British political landscape. The possibility of a "British Obama" came first from think tanks such as the Fabian Society. (Katwala November 8, 2008) Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, most newspapers agreed that a "British Obama" would be unobtainable in the foreseeable future due to the fewer routes to power because of the centralized state in the UK compared to the US, the

very small number of black and ethnic minorities (BME) MPs currently in office, the entrenched class-system of the UK, and the very different histories of the two nations concerning slavery in particular.(Allen 2008, 25; Orr 2008; Watt 2008) Nevertheless, Obama's election clearly motivated more talk about whether the Brits could achieve what the Americans seemed to have. However, as the press openly acknowledged, race is less the frontier that concerns modern Brits than class and gender. The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, asked the Speaker of the House of Commons to call a Speaker's Conference for 2009 (currently underway) to encouraging more women and BME candidates to become members of parliament. The Conference, which is not open to the public but meets periodically throughout 2009, is meant to make suggestions to the House of Commons to diversify its ranks. This is only the fifth Speaker's Conference held this century, and it seems clear that the discussion with the American example was an important catalyst for taking first steps, with the important caveat that class and gender are at the forefront of the current British discussion.(BBC News ; Barleon 2009; Katwala 2008)

It wasn't just elites who were motivated to think differently about their politics. A poll by the Hansard Society found that black and ethnic minority citizens in the UK became more interested in politics, more convinced of the political system's potential to produce meaningful change, and more likely to participate in future voting in the wake of Obama's victory.(BBC News) In this way, the 2008 presidential election really was the world's election.

Live coverage of inauguration

Attention to the actual inauguration of President Obama (something Europeans have trouble comprehending especially in systems where a new leader takes power the next morning after an election) was enormous. All the media outlets went to considerable trouble to provide live coverage and commentary on nearly all types of outlets, putting considerable expense into

the project with British correspondents being sent overseas and British commentators at the ready to explain events at the time or on the later news shows dedicated to this story. (Hudson, Hannah and Sally Newall 2009) The BBC streamed coverage of the inauguration and related events live. Over 5.1 million people, a 33% share of the British television audience, tuned in to watch it on BBC1.(Fitzsimmons 2009)

After the Inauguration

Following the inauguration, a spate of coverage emerged showing British impatience with Obama. Part of this was due to the massive build up before the elections of what could be expected from a new administration. However, much of the early coverage revealed again the unfamiliarity outsiders have with our presidential system – leading to enormous frustration that the Obama administration could not make dramatic reversals in US foreign policy or in the global financial crisis.

First 100 days: Michael Tomasky in the *Guardian* – a publication broadly pro-Obama – admitted Obama had achieved very little (and was incredibly dependent on Congress for any achievements) in his first months, but that Obama had changed the tone of American politics for the better, and that was an important start for world politics (Tomasky 2009) Jonathan Freedland warned Obama not to make the same mistakes New Labour made by squandering a mandate and fearing the opposition too much. While applauding Obama's accomplishments on torture and stem-cell research, Freedland compared the first months of New Labour's regime in 1997 to that of the US in 2009 (Freedland 2009)

NHS: The Brits were truly excited that an American president might seek to emulate their National Health Service (NHS) to provide healthcare for all Americans. The NHS is often seen as a sacred cow in British politics, which is why no government, since the establishment on

the NHS in 1948, has cut its funding and why both Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in office and now Conservative Leader David Cameron in opposition, are keen to stress the importance of it. Therefore, when universal health care came under attack in the American media, the British press (and public) were incensed and were broadly supportive of the Obama policy. Rumors of abandoning a national insurance policy were widely reported and that Obama was considering a compromise to appease the Republicans, but very few newspapers actually mentioned the difficulty of passage through Congress. However, British confidence in a better outcome for Americans was injured by the portrayal of the NHS in Republican ads in the summer which portrayed the British healthcare system as something inept, inefficient, and inhumane. The British were dismayed and outraged that their system would be used to fuel the American policy debate in this way. (Clark 2009)

Public opinion polls about nature of Obama transformation of US foreign policy.

Obama has gone a long way to bucking the Bush-induced anti-Americanism in the UK as Peter Riddell showed in his excellent article in *The Times* just a week after Obama's election. Riddell cites results from a survey by Populus of 1,508 UK residents, asking their opinion of the US, what they think of its relationship with Britain and its leaders, and how important the UK-US relationship is compared to that with Europe broadly. Across the board, UK respondents had a more favorable attitude towards the US after Obama's election than they had the last time they were surveyed in 2006.(Riddell 2009)

Populus Poll for The Times, UK Citizens (% change from 2006)

% agreeing	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	All
It is important for Britain's long term security that we have a close & special relationship with the US	84% (+21%)	82% (+14%)	79% (+33%)	80% (+22%)
Britain's future lies more with Europe than with America	67% (-1%)	59% (-2%)	70% (-)	62% (-3%)
America is a force for good in the world	61% (+8%)	58% (+2%)	47% (+14%)	54% (+10%)
Gordon Brown should be as close to Barack Obama as Tony Blair was to George W. Bush	74%	53%	63%	61%

Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,503 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 7th November 2008 and 9th November 2008. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to be representative of all adults. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

On inauguration day, the BBC World Service poll found that 67% of 17,000 respondents in 17 countries worldwide thought Obama would improve US relations abroad. Only 46% agreed with that statement six months prior.(BBC News) In June of 2009, a World Public Opinion.Org poll found that 61% of 19,000 respondents world-wide said they still thought highly of Obama. Citizens of many nations preferred leaders of other countries to their own (Brits preferred Obama's performance in foreign affairs and American's preferred Gordon Brown's).(World Public Opinion.Org 2009) In a Transatlantic Trends Survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund just last month, 77% of Europeans said Obama is handling foreign affairs well, compared with 19% approval for Bush at the end of his administration. This is not to say there aren't issues; indeed, about half of Europeans are disappointed with Obama's policies in Afghanistan and towards Iran.(BBC News)

Implications

What difference does it make if Europeans, and the British in particular, especially like Barack Obama? Well, it does improve America's image in the world if others think our president is worthy of respect. But why should it matter so much to a foreign polity to the extent that they read our president's books more than we do and get offended if we misrepresent their health care system? It matters precisely because most Americans have no notion of what it means for the US to be the world's only superpower. It's an easy word to say, but to believe that your economy, your environment, your security, and your standard of living all will be materially affected by the actions of another state is how even established democracies like the United Kingdom views America. It probably is not true that the US controls so much of the fortunes of these other states, but the belief endures. What does that have to do with the state of the US party system? The interesting perspective I gained is that these other nations tend to extend their views of our leaders to our parties with potentially damaging results. Ironically, at the same time that British voters were uniformly condemning Bush and his administration (and by extension, any Republican) they were in the midst of their own bipartisan 'expenses' scandal in parliament which somehow the majority of Brits blamed on the ruling Labour party. Currently, the British public favors the Conservative party over the Labour party to lead the next government. While one can argue that the British Conservative party and the US Republican party differ considerably, especially over social issues, they have a great deal in common on economic policy. More importantly, the structural differences between the British and European systems, specifically federalism and separation of powers, make it unfair to paint American parties with such a broad stroke. At some point in the future, the US will probably have a Republican as chief executive. What will Europeans think of Americans then? It's time for all

sides to have a realistic view of what opportunities and constraints partisan politics makes within and between countries.

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