

Obama handily takes White House
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In a historic victory, Democratic Senator Barack Obama has been elected the 44th president of the United States.

Obama, the first African American to be elected to the nation's highest office, was declared the winner by all of the country's major media networks as the polling on the West Coast of the US closed Tuesday night, even as millions of votes remained to be counted throughout the country.

"A new dawn of American leadership is at hand," Obama told a cheering crowd of about 125,000 people gathered in Chicago's Grant Park, after the formal concession of rival John McCain.

"You understand the enormity of the challenges we face - two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century," he said. "The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America - I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you - we as a people will get there."

"Because of what we did on this day, at this moment, change has come to America. This victory belongs to you," he said, adding that "This victory alone is not the change we seek. It's just a chance to make that change."

Pledge from McCain

The declaration of the election for Obama, based on extensive exit polling of voters, as well as millions of more votes recorded in the states along the Eastern Seaboard and the Midwest, set off a joyous celebration among those who had gathered all afternoon and evening in Grant Park, and in major urban areas around the country.

McCain conceded the election and congratulated Obama in a speech before supporters at the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona, the state that he has represented over the last 20 years. He said he had phoned Obama to congratulate him personally.

"This is a historic election," he said, "and I recognise the special significance it has for African Americans and the special pride that must be theirs tonight... Senator Obama and I have argued our differences, and he has prevailed. No doubt many of those differences remain. These are difficult times for our country. And I pledge to him tonight to do all in my power to help him lead us through the many challenges we face."

With an estimated two-thirds of the national vote counted, Obama was leading McCain by 51 to 48 percent - or about 2.5 million votes, but that gap was expected to widen when the West Coast states, including the country's most populous, California, reported their results. He will be the first Democratic candidate to win more than 50 percent of the national vote since the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The gap in the all-important Electoral College was much larger, as Obama swept key "swing

states", most notably Florida, Colorado, Ohio, and Virginia. Those states assured the Democrat that he would net substantially more than the 270 electoral votes needed to win, and most analysts placed his eventual total at around 350, with a number of other swing states - including Missouri, North Carolina, Nevada, and Indiana - considered still close to call.

McCain, who won most of the deep South, his home state of Arizona, and the most sparsely populated mid-Western and Rocky Mountain states, appeared certain to fall short of 200 votes in the Electoral College.

A national president

Obama, on the other hand, swept the West Coast, the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic states, and the industrial Midwest (with the possible exception of Indiana where he was narrowly ahead with most of the votes counted).

He also made major inroads in regions that have generally voted solidly Republican over most of the last four decades - including the South, where he won Florida and Virginia and was running slightly ahead in North Carolina; and two key Rocky Mountain states - New Mexico and Colorado, where the Latino vote, at least two-thirds of which went for Obama, appears to have been decisive.

"This gives him a southern base, and pulling in New Mexico and Colorado makes a big difference," said David Gergen, a CNN commentator and former top political adviser to Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. "He's a national president; he represents all sections of the country. (That) strengthens the perception that he represents everybody."

Obama's victory crowned an evening that strongly favoured Democratic candidates in Congress. As of midnight, Democrats had won four Senate seats previously held by Republicans and appeared to be on course to win at least three more, giving them a majority in the 100-seat chamber of 58, just two seats shy of the 60 needed to defeat any Republican attempts to block legislation through the filibuster.

Democrats were also expected to gain at least 20 seats in the House of Representatives bringing their total to around 250 of the 435-seat chamber. The last Republican member of the House from New England, Christopher Shays of Connecticut, was defeated in his re-election bid, while virtually all Democratic incumbents were returned to office.

The result will be that two of the three branches of the US government will be controlled by Democrats, putting them in a powerful position to enact their legislative agenda, particularly in dealing with the economy and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the dominant concern of the overwhelming majority of voters, according to exit polls. "It's a big night for the Democrats," sighed Reagan's former Education Secretary William Bennett, a Republican commentator.

Passing of the Old Order

Obama's victory marks the culmination of one of the most spectacular ascendancies in US political history. The son of a Kenyan father and a mother from Kansas only came to national attention in 2004 when, as a mere senator in the Illinois state legislature, he created a sensation in a keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention that year

and went on to win election to the US Senate that November.

When he entered the presidential contest nearly two years ago, he was given little chance by the pundits, particularly in the face of the well-financed campaign of New York Senator Hillary Clinton, the party establishment's favourite. But, after his surprise win in the Iowa caucuses earlier this year and with a grassroots campaign that reflected his background as a community organiser, he gained the delegates he needed to prevail.

Analysts from both parties hailed Obama's victory as a "milestone" in the troubled and often violent history of US race relations given widespread scepticism as recently as six months ago that a black man - Obama is actually biracial - could be elected president.

Obama did not get as many white votes as McCain, the split being 55-43 percent in McCain's favour. But some 95 percent of black voters, who turned out in unprecedented numbers, voted for Obama.

More than two thirds of newly registered voters - most of whom were less than 30 years old - also supported Obama.

"We have just achieved an incredible milestone for which the world has to have more respect for the United States," said Bennett.

"This is a passing of the old order," Gergen added.

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