

# TEN LESSONS FROM THE 2008 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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*“Martin Luther King said he had a dream, and I feel right now at this time, this is the dream he wanted.”*

*- - Judy Brown, 56, Jacksonville bus driver*

I flew to Washington, D.C. on October 31, 2008 to represent COMELEC Chairman Jose A.R. Melo in the 2008 US Presidential Election Program sponsored by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a non-profit, democracy development organization that works to give people a voice in the way they are governed. The election program was attended by election officials representing forty-one (41) countries. It was during the second day of the program when Sen. Barack Obama was elected by the US electorate after a historic quest for the Presidency. The international program participants shared the sentiments of many that the election of Obama was “historic,” “revolutionary” and “record breaking.” In its editorial, Chicago Tribune stated that “when he [Obama] was born in 1961, African Americans risked death merely to register to vote in some Southern states... Yet today, the nation is willing to entrust its future to a son whose father was black.” Robert Robertson, deputy sports managing editor of USA TODAY, wrote that with Obama’s victory “it is a great time to be alive and living in America today.”

The IFES-sponsored 2008 Presidential Election international gathering combined lectures on U.S. politics, electoral campaigns and processes, observation tours of polling places in Washington, D.C. and several Virginia counties on election day, interviews of poll workers, interaction with election officials from other countries and a visit to the U.S. Capitol. It was held amidst a momentous political event in the

U.S.. On the whole, it was very insightful. It provides many lessons on ballot democracy worth pondering as the Philippines prepares for its automated presidential election in 2010. Among these many lessons are:

1. **Young voters made a big difference in the elections.** Young volunteers organized, campaigned and fundraised for Barack Obama. For months, they focused not only on registering new voters but in tracking down blacks, Latinos and many other people who had been registered but never voted. True enough after the polls closed, national exit polls showed Obama winning 66% of voters under 30, higher than Ronald Reagan's 59% in 1984 and the highest in data available since 1976. Between ages 30-44, 53% voted for Obama, and according to the Associated Press, more than two-thirds of voters under 30 backed him.

2. **Modern technology boosted Barack Obama's candidacy.** Obama adeptly used interactive social technology. According to David Talbot, Obama's website [www.my.barackobama.com](http://www.my.barackobama.com) was created to generate fund support and to wage a successful network campaign. Besides the web, the spirited Obama campaign team employed blogs, click-to-donate tools, phone brigade, text messaging, door to door conversations and online political updates.

USA TODAY editorialize that "Beyond TV, for better and worse the Internet became a larger player in presidential politics. It was the engine behind much of Obama's success in raising record amounts of money in smaller donations. It became a viral means of speeding all manner of political messages, humor and rumor."

3. **Televised presidential and vice-presidential debates helped voters decide.** The debates informed the electorate about the candidates' persona and stand on issues like the raging economic crisis, energy, healthcare, global warming, education, US war in Iraq and Afghanistan, etc. Prof. Diana Carin of the University of Kansas and one of the lecturers in the IFES-sponsored program opined that debates moved

undecided voters and soft supporters turning to the other candidate and reinforced previously held positions. She added that the debates projected Obama as “winning” and McCain as “non-winning” because of the latter’s non-verbal communication like scowling and being rude and caustic. The body language was very apparent on TV.

4. **Early voting ensured shorter voting lines on Election Day in battleground states.** According to Paul Gronke, a researcher of the Early Voting Information Center in Portland, Oregon, early voting appeared to have accounted for about **one-third** of the votes cast in the presidential race, compared with fourteen (14) per cent eight years ago. In North Carolina, the number of early voters equaled seventy (70) per cent of the entire turnout in 2004. In Chicago, more than half the vote came early. In states where work excuses are required for voting workers or don’t allow early voting, such as Pennsylvania and Virginia, voting lines were longer.

5. **Use of automated election system fast tracked voting, counting and announcing of election results.** In the late evening of Election Day, Obama was proclaimed as the US 44<sup>th</sup> President. This speedy announcement could be attributed to the use of voting technology in the U.S.A.

There is, however, a variation in polling and voting systems in that land of opportunities. Eighteen (18) states use paper-based voting system (primarily precinct-count optical scanner). Fourteen (14) states employ direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting systems in some or all jurisdictions and require voter-verified paper-audit trails (VVPATS). Four (4) states utilize DREs in some or all jurisdictions both with and without VVPATS. New York employs lever machines and the District of Columbia use DREs in some or all jurisdictions and do not require the use of VVPATS. Oregon votes entirely by mail.

Kinstall Brace, president of Election Data Services, a company that examines voting machine usage across the country stressed that “From 2004 to 2006, electronic

voting machine usage went up and 2006 was the high water mark. Then use came down. From 2006 to 2008, every jurisdiction that has changed has gone to optical scan ... and election administrators are now moving their decisions in that direction.”

In some parts of Florida and California, all of Connecticut, parts of New York and other jurisdictions around the country switched from either DRE or lever machines to optical-scan systems.

According to The PEW Center On The States, in its book “Election Preview 2008,” the voting systems in the different states are as follows:

<b>STATES</b>	<b>VOTING SYSTEMS</b>
Alabama	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Alaska	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and DRE with VVPAT
Arizona	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device
Arkansas	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and DRE without VVPAT
California	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device
Colorado	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and DRE with and without VVPAT
Connecticut	Optical scan and vote-by-phone system
Delaware	DRE
District of Columbia	Optical scan and DRE
Florida	Optical scan and DRE
Georgia	DRE
Hawaii	Optical scan and DRE with VVPAT
Idaho	Optical scan, punch card, hand-counted paper ballots and ballot-marking device
Illinois	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device
Indiana	Optical scan, DRE and ballot-marking device
Iowa	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Kansas	Optical scan, DREs with and without VVPAT, ballot-marking device and hand-counted paper ballots
Kentucky	DRE and optical scan
Louisiana	DRE
Maine	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and vote-by-phone system
Maryland	DRE
Massachusetts	Optical scan and ballot-marking device

Michigan	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Minnesota	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Mississippi	DRE with and without VVPAT and optical scan
Missouri	DRE with VVPAT, optical scan and ballot-marking device
Montana	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and ballot-marking device
Nebraska	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Nevada	DRE with VVPAT
New Hampshire	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and vote-by-phone system
New Jersey	DRE
New Mexico	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
New York	Lever and ballot-marking device
North Carolina	DRE with VVPAT, optical scan and ballot-marking device
North Dakota	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Ohio	DRE with VVPAT, optical scan and ballot-marking device
Oklahoma	Optical scan and vote-by-phone system
Oregon	Vote by mail and Alternative Format Ballot
Pennsylvania	DRE, optical scan, ballot-marking device
Rhode Island	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
South Carolina	DRE
South Dakota	Optical scan and ballot-marking device
Tennessee	Optical scan and DRE
Texas	DRE, optical scan and ballot-marking device
Utah	DRE with VVPAT
Vermont	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and vote-by-phone system
Virginia	DRE, optical scan and ballot-marking device
Washington	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device
West Virginia	DRE with VVPAT, optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots and ballot-marking device
Wisconsin	Optical scan, hand-counted paper ballots, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device
Wyoming	Optical scan, DRE with VVPAT and ballot-marking device

6. **Sen. John McCain's gracious and immediate concession speech is worth emulating.** In the evening of November 4, 2008, when Obama had obtained and even surpassed the electoral votes of 270, Sen. McCain graciously conceded defeat, congratulated Obama and offered to support his presidency. This fine democratic behavior demonstrates a political maturity and strongly contributes to political stability. In Delaware, a Return Day, the state's traditional day of post-election healing took

place where winners and losers participated in a parade to symbolically “bury the hatchet.”

7. **The tri-media (TV, radio and print) kept the electorate informed about current issues and in projecting the potentials and capacities of the competing candidates.** Their day-to-day election reports, updates and commentaries enlightened the voters and helped them make their choices. It is noteworthy that six (6) days before the election, Obama delivered a three million dollar 30-minute advertisement on seven television channels during prime time, speaking to an estimated thirty-three (33) million viewers.

8. **Redefined moral issues and faith dimension were evident in the electoral campaign.** Rev. Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a national network connecting faith and justice, said that many Evangelicals and Catholics have redefined moral issues more than abortion and gay marriage. To them moral issues include healthcare, education, housing, jobs, Afghanistan and Iraq, poverty and environment.

In its 2007 document on political responsibility “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said any efforts to reform the health care system must respect human dignity and protect human life; meet the needs of the poor and the 47 million uninsured Americans, including pregnant women, unborn children, immigrants and other vulnerable populations; protect the conscience rights of Catholics and Catholic institutions, and provide effective, compassionate care those with HIV and AIDS. And days before election day, the U.S. bishops encouraged Catholics to pray a novena for life, justice and peace before the election entitled “Novena for Faithful Citizenship.”

LOS ANGELES TIMES wrote that at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008, a first-ever interfaith prayer gathering was held. During a presidential forum in August 2008 at Saddleback Church, where Obama and McCain were

interviewed separately by a church leader, Obama spoke about “walking humbly with our God” and quoted from the Gospel of Matthew. His acceptance speech during the Democratic National Convention echoed the church-inspired speeches of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

9. **In managing the electoral process, volunteerism among the adults and the young was impressive.** Poll workers in the different counties in most of the fifty states were not civil servants or public officials. They were volunteers, many of whom are in their 60s and 70s. And many of them come from poor neighborhoods. An Election Center, said William O. Field, U.S. Electoral Specialist, is in charge of training these volunteers for poll duty. The education module consists of alphabet and number tests, video and bingo games to keep alive the attention and interest of the elderly poll workers.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia came out with a 2008 Virginia Voter Empowerment Card that contained election day guide on voting and avoiding voting problems.

10. **The U.S. Presidential Election was not perfect.** There were snags and glitches on election day. USA TODAY reported that polling places opened late or were understaffed. Voters found they were not registered or were asked for ID when it was not required. Electronic or optical-scan machines broke down in some states, causing paper ballots to pile up. Emergency backup ballots were underused in some states and overused in others. And from Virginia to New Mexico, some voters were told to vote on November 4 or later.

THE WASHINGTON POST also reported that last minute lawsuits challenging election procedures were lodged on November 3, 2008 in Philadelphia, Indianapolis, New Hampshire and Ohio. But election law specialists said potential problems at the polls had been asserted by nearly a dozen lawsuits nationwide filed in

recent weeks, in which federal and state courts upheld the eligibility of hundreds of thousands of voters.

Jonah H. Goldman, Director of the National Campaign for Fair Elections at the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said that several college campus and minority communities were targeted with disinformation via fliers, text messages, automated calls and group postings on the Facebook social networking site.

Despite these, the American people did not cast in doubt the outcome of the elections. Many say that the Americans trust their electoral processes. Justice Johann Kriengler, former Chairperson of Independent Electoral Commission of Africa, said that electoral administration efficiency alone is not enough but that people must trust the system.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission, a creation of the Help America Vote of 2002 Law, monitors all elections in the U.S.A., serves as an oversight body and submits recommendations to Congress to improve elections. For sure, Congress will be receiving recommendations from the Commission after this 2008 Presidential Election.

In all, the eventful 2008 US Presidential Elections provided valuable lessons to all those who want democracy to flourish in their countries, the Philippines included. Inspiring as it is, it paved the way for the election of the first African-American President, Barack Obama, whose soaring and stirring speech at the Chicago Grant Square on November 5, 2008, affirmed the worth of every voter, the value of volunteerism, the need for undying hope and the clamor for government of the people, for the people and by the people.