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A Fresh Start

By MICHELLE AUSTEIN

A more diverse American society has produced a wide range of candidates for President in an unusual election.

An interview with two experts about this year's U.S. presidential election.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election is unusual because neither an incumbent president nor vice president is running for the highest office in the land. Charlie Cook, editor and publisher of the *Cook Political Report*, and Jerry Hagstrom, contributing editor of the *National Journal*, discuss what's in store for the 2008 election season.

Can you tell us why Americans and international audiences are paying so much attention so early to the 2008 presidential race and why this race seems to be different than previous U.S. elections?

Cook: It's really the first one in 80 years that we haven't had a sitting president or vice president seeking the presidency. To have a wide-open race for both [the Democratic and Republican parties] is really extraordinary.

Usually you have a president or vice president on one side that is generally going to win [his party's nomination] easily, or maybe just two people running, and then a big field of lots of candidates on the other side. This time, it's big fields on both sides. It's really an amazing election cycle. We have never seen anything like it.

Hagstrom: I think it's also both a fun race to watch and an important race for people in other countries. And it's important to start watching it earlier because it's so unclear who will be the candidates and, of course, who will finally win the election.

Candidates began raising money earlier than in past elections. Part of the reason is that no incumbent is running. Are there other reasons?

Cook: It's harder and harder to reach voters than it used to be. Twenty and 30 years ago, you had three television networks, and you could pretty much reach everyone that way. Now with cable and satellite television and hundreds



TIM BOYD © AP/WWP

Voters, most of them university students, form lines to register and cast ballots in Durham, New Hampshire during the last presidential elections in 2004.



CHERYL SENTER © AP/WIDEWORLD

A Republican presidential hopeful, Mitt Romney partakes in a traditional campaign event, cuddling a baby, eight-month-old Harrison Rayner, in Kingston, New Hampshire in July, 2007.

in American history. Do you have thoughts on why that is happening this season and if this sets any type of precedent for future elections?

Hagstrom: Well, I think that one reason is because the society has evolved and is really more diverse and more accepting of diversity. Twenty or 30 years ago, it would have been hard for these [candidates] to get taken seriously.

Cook: A Gallup poll earlier this year said 94 percent of Americans would vote for a qualified candidate who is an African American. Eighty-eight percent would vote for a qualified candidate who is a woman. Those statistics wouldn't have existed eight or 12 or 16 or 20 years ago. Our country is more diverse now than it used to be. It's more accepting of diversity now than it used to be. Yes, we have had women run before. We have had African Americans run for president, but they never had a real chance. This time they are running and they have a real chance, and that says something about how America has changed.

Many people in the United States expect Iraq will dominate campaigns. What other issues are we hearing about?

Cook: I think Iraq is going to be a big factor, but I'm not sure. We don't know where this situation will be in the fall of 2008. How the economy is doing could be an issue. The environment and global warming have finally come of age. It's finally the issue that some people—for 20, 30 years—have been working to make it. But at the end of the day, most voters are evaluating people, not issues.

Hagstrom: In the end, what really matters in a presidential race is character. It's a question of whom do you trust.

Many of the states have moved their primary elections earlier on the calendar. It seems like a large number are going to have their election on February 5. What impact does this have on the campaign season?

Cook: Well, it's ironic that a lot of states have moved their primaries forward to February 5 so that they could have a role. And now, so many have done so that most of those states and people aren't really going to have much of a say. When you have 21 or 22 or 23 out of 50 states, including some of the largest states in the union, all voting on the same day, it's kind of hard for indi-

and hundreds of channels, and with a lot of other distractions, it's harder to reach voters; it's hard to get a message across to them.

Hagstrom: Many, many years ago, people used to campaign at big events, or they campaigned at big factories, and they got a big turnout. Today you can't do that. You have to realize that Americans are working in offices. They don't really turn out for these big events. So you have to reach people through television and radio, and that requires money to buy advertising.

Cook: In the United States, people are really voting on the candidate—the person—and not the party. That requires a lot more spending than you would see in a parliamentary form of government.

Hagstrom: Because we use a primary system of selecting our candidates, that means that a candidate can really come from nowhere. He or she does not have to have a long history within the party in order to get a nomination. But it takes money and people and time to reach those party members before the primary takes place.

This year's candidates seem to be among the most diverse

What are Primaries and Caucuses?

Primaries and caucuses are held in all 50 states under rules set by the political parties and the state governments to help determine the Republican and Democratic parties' candidates for President.

Caucuses gauge support for candidates through local meetings of party members, while primary elections gauge support through statewide direct voting by people who have registered as members of one party or the other.

These events determine which candidates will receive a state's votes at the political parties' national conventions later in the year. The primary voters are actually choosing a group of delegates pledged to a particular candidate, and trusting them to vote for that person at the convention. State party leaders who support the winning candidates select the delegates.

It's easy to track the primary process because the news media

report how many delegates each candidate has won in each state and how many more they need to "clinich the nomination."

Historically, the Iowa caucus in the Midwest and the New Hampshire primary in New England, held in January of each four-year presidential election cycle, have been the first two events. This has given these two small states a lot of power, because if candidates do well there, they can attract more support and money for the later pri-

maries; if they do poorly they may drop out of the race. This year, some of the bigger states have pushed to hold their primaries earlier so that they can have more influence in the nomination process. They have done this despite threats from the national party leaders that delegates chosen in such early primaries may not get a full vote at the conventions. As of early January, the 2008 primary calendar was not yet settled.

—L.K.L and S.G.

Presidential primaries originated in the United States at the turn of the 20th century as an outgrowth of the Progressive Movement. Reformers fighting corruption at that time objected to links between political bosses and big business. Primaries became part of their reform effort to return the government to the people.

Florida enacted the first presidential primary law in 1901, giving party officials the option of holding an election to choose national con-

vention delegates, but there was no provision for placing the names of presidential candidates on the ballot. Oregon became the first state to

hold a preferential primary vote for president in 1910, and by 1912, a dozen states had enacted presidential primary laws. Over the years, that number increased, with 17 states holding primaries in 1968 and 30 in 1976. By 2000, and again in 2008, the number will be 41 states, with the rest having caucuses. —Stuart Gorin, USINFO

For more information:

Background on the New Hampshire Primary

<http://www.politicallibrary.org/Current-Primary/background.aspx>

Iowa's first-in-the-nation status

http://www.sos.state.ia.us/press/2007/2007_02_20.html

vidual states to get personal attention. My guess is that we will know who the [main parties'] candidates are, if not after February 5, then maybe the set of primaries a week or so after that.

Then, we'll have the campaign kind of go into remission for a little. And people will focus on other things for two or three months, and then the campaign will sort of resume and pick back up all the way through the November election.

Hagstrom: So far, it looks like the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary...held before these February 5 primaries, will still be important in giving a signal of whom the American people like.

What do undecided voters look for, and do we have any sense yet of what they will be looking for in this season?

Cook: They are looking for character, or sort of comfort. It's like you are trying to decide whom you want to invite into your living room and be on your television set for the next four years. Voters understand that they are not even aware of a lot of the issues that presidents have to face. It's whom they feel comfortable with, who is going to make decisions about things that they have no way of even knowing exist.

Hagstrom: I think that, in terms of those voters, one issue that will matter is where the war in Iraq stands when we really get into the campaign season. It could be their dominant issue or maybe something else will be dominant.

How will the 2008 race affect U.S. foreign policy?

Hagstrom: The Democratic candidates have all said that they would make changes in the policy in Iraq, while the Republican candidates at this point are differing about whether they would follow the course that President [George W.] Bush has laid out or what changes they would make.

Cook: I think the President of the United States represents the face of America to the rest of the world. It's an opportunity to start afresh.

Would either of you be able to suggest whether or not voter turnout will be on the rise?

Cook: We've actually seen voter turnout rise for the last six or eight years for a couple of reasons. We used to hear people say, "It doesn't matter who wins." Well, you don't hear that anymore because, I think, people understand whether it's terrorism or

whether it's the war or poverty or Hurricane Katrina, people believe now that it matters who's President of the United States.

Some of the comparisons that are made of U.S. voter turnout, they're not really fair comparisons. You look at the United States and you think of municipal, county, state, federal, primary elections, general elections, in some cases run-offs, special elections.



JAC C. HONG © AP/WIDEWORLD

A Democratic presidential hopeful, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (left), and fellow Democrat, Senator Barack Obama, respond to a question during a candidates' debate at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas in November, 2007.

Americans are simply asked to vote more often than people in other countries. I think there are over 600,000 elective offices in the United States. It's really not a fair comparison because Americans do vote more than any other people in the world. It's just that they're spread over a lot more different elections.

Hagstrom: People do realize that it does matter who wins, and I would think that the voters would be quite highly motivated to turn out, but it also may depend on who the candidates are and whether the base of each party really cares about electing the person who has been nominated.

We've seen technology playing more of a role in how candidates are discussed, especially informally on the Web. Do you think that affects how candidates campaign?

Cook: I think if you looked at overall campaign budgets, you



Left: A Republican presidential hopeful, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee plays a bass guitar with a band during a rally at an Ohio school in November, 2007.



Left: A Democratic presidential hopeful, former Senator John Edwards talks to potential voters at a house party in Nashua, New Hampshire in July, 2007.

Below: Rudy Giuliani (right), New York City's former mayor and a Republican presidential hopeful, poses for a photo with university student Dean Schwartz (left) during a campaign visit at a Cuban restaurant in Miami, Florida, in October, 2007.

would find a larger but still very, very small percentage of [candidates'] campaign budgets devoted to new technologies.

Hagstrom: [The Internet] is very good for organizing your supporters; it's very good for raising money, but it is not good

for persuasion. The exception to that has been the development of YouTube, a visual medium that is on the Internet.

Every campaign now has some young person with a camera following the opposition candidate. It comes back to this issue with character. [Americans] want to see who this person is in an unguarded moment. And some of these unguarded moments occur when the candidate is speaking to a friendly audience. And so this development of filming all the candidates all the time and putting any mistakes on YouTube is, in a way, very revealing. I don't think voters should think that it is the only aspect of that candidate, but it has become an important part of these campaigns.

In U.S. elections, the outcome of the presidential race comes down to a handful of swing states, and we generally see the same few states being targeted again and again because they could vote either Democratic or Republican. Do we have a sense that this time around it's going to be the same handful of influential states, any new states?

Cook: To a large extent it's the same states. If you look at the 2000 George W. Bush-Al Gore race and the 2004 George W. Bush-John Kerry race, there are only three states in the whole union that were different from one time to the next. Gore was able to win both New Mexico and Iowa but lost New Hampshire, and Kerry won New Hampshire and lost New Mexico and Iowa. I think it's largely going to be the same states, but we're seeing Democrats moving up a little bit more in some of the southwestern states. We'll see New Hampshire, which used to be a very conservative, Republican-oriented state, has become less and less conservative and more Democratic. But at the same time, you're seeing some other states that are getting less Democratic and more Republican. Louisiana, for example. West Virginia—we're

Elected Offices in the United States

While the United States has a single federal government, the country contains:

- 50 state governments,
- more than 300,000 elected positions with local governments (county, city and town),
- and nearly 200,000 special purpose districts such as school districts and water districts.

Consequently, U.S. voters are asked to vote not just for president and Congress but also for thousands of state and local government officials, including: state legislators, state governors and lieutenant governors, state auditors, county commissioners, mayors of towns and cities, aldermen, judges, constables, magistrates, sheriffs, justices of the peace, and members of



"Job creation isn't that difficult. ... Elect me and you've just created one."

school boards, college boards, utility boards, and other positions of public trust.

Some of the more unusual elected positions are: county coroner, members of irrigation districts and town cemetery commissions, and tree warden, the official overseeing the removal of hazardous trees on town property.

seeing its voting patterns change and getting hard for Democrats, and it used to be a safe Democratic state.

Hagstrom: What I'm expecting in this election is a lot of fighting for the rural voter. Rural America is generally regarded as Republican territory, but it isn't always Republican, and the Democrats did quite well in the congressional races in 2006.

States have been spending a lot of time and money since 2000 looking at how they conduct their elections. Do you think this is going to affect voter turnout?

Cook: Voter turnout in 2004 was higher than it was in 2000. In the last two mid-term elections, voter turnout has gone up. As a country we do not spend a whole lot of money on our voter-election administration process, and as a result we have a system that has got a lot of flaws. It's not fraud, contrary to what a lot of people believe.

If Americans wanted to spend more money on vote counting and election administration, we could have a really, really good system, but do you want to do that at the expense of, say, education? Health care? Our responsibilities around the world in terms of foreign aid? In the great scheme of things, having an exact, precise count on elections when the vast majority of them

For more information:

The Cook Political Report

<http://cookpolitical.com/>

National Journal

<http://nationaljournal.com/>

Trends in American public opinion

<http://www.pollingreport.com/>

U.S. presidential election on YouTube

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=u.s.+presidential+election+&search=Search



aren't even close—that's just never been a real high priority for people in terms of allocating their money.

Hagstrom: One of the reasons you see so many stories about these variations in the elections is that our elections are run by the state governments. The federal government gets involved only when there is a major problem. So, you do have a lot of variation from state to state and county to county.

Another factor is that we have this [past] legacy of not allowing African Americans in the southern states to vote. And nobody wants to go back to a system in which we are restricting the right to vote. There is a resistance to becoming so strict that you might be preventing somebody from voting. And this is a very important issue in a country that is as diverse in population as the United States.

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