

# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## Introduction

### Focus

This *CBC News in Review* story focuses on the last lap of the marathon U.S. presidential election race, examining the main candidates, issues, battleground states, and how the result will affect the U.S. and the rest of the world.

### Did you know . . .

In U.S. elections, states are referred to as either “red” for Republican or “blue” for Democratic. This colour code is fairly recent and is believed to refer to two of the colours of the American flag, the other being white. Ironically, in most countries of the world, red is the colour associated with socialist or communist parties, while in Canada it is the Liberals’ colour.

### Quote

“Government should work for us, not against us. It should help us, not hurt us.”  
— Barack Obama  
(*Toronto Star*, August 30, 2008)

On November 4, 2008, Americans voted for Barack Obama as their president in one of the most historic and exciting campaigns in U.S. history. As the U.S. presidential election marathon entered its home stretch in the fall of 2008, it was becoming more likely that Americans were turning to the Democratic Party and its inspiring standard-bearer, Illinois Senator Barack Obama. After eight years of President George W. Bush’s right-wing Republican administration, a growing number of U.S. voters seemed receptive to Obama’s message of “change you can believe in.” For his part, Obama’s Republican challenger, Arizona Senator John McCain, had tried to distance himself from the unpopular Bush and his policies, despite efforts from the Obama camp to tie him to the discredited President. Polls taken during the final weeks of the campaign showed Obama lengthening his once narrow national lead over McCain; Obama’s rallies in pivotal “battleground” states across the nation were attracting huge, enthusiastic crowds. More importantly, however, Obama’s lead over McCain was consolidating itself in the key states that both candidates needed to win in order to secure a majority of votes in the Electoral College, the body that really chooses the U.S. president. Both Obama and McCain were concentrating their efforts in these all-important electoral battlegrounds—states such as Pennsylvania, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, Virginia, and North Carolina. On the other hand, they all but ignored areas of the country where they felt their respective advantages were secure—in Obama’s case large blue states such as New York, California, and his home state of Illinois, and for McCain most of the southern and midwestern red states.

Obama and McCain had squared off in three presidential debates held in the months before the November 4, 2008, election. These contests had seen the two contenders clash over the major issues of the campaign, the most important of which was the dire state of the U.S. economy. Many observers had predicted at the outset of the presidential race that foreign policy, and in particular the unpopular war in Iraq, would dominate the campaign. But the credit crunch, mortgage foreclosures, bank failures, rising unemployment, and serious gyrations in the stock market during the summer and fall of 2008 led most Americans to conclude that economic issues were foremost on their minds. They were looking to the presidential candidates for reassurance and answers. Because of the growing uncertainty, or even panic, over the economy, Obama’s once precarious lead in the opinion polls gained a major boost. Many Americans held President Bush and his Republican administration responsible for the nation’s difficulties. A \$700-billion bailout package the U.S. Congress passed to shore up failing banks and finance companies was widely unpopular, despite the fact that both Obama and McCain supported it as the only alternative to an even deeper economic crisis, possibly even a depression like that of the 1930s.

Both Obama and McCain made an important strategic choice in their selection of a vice-presidential running mate just before their parties’ respective conventions in late summer 2008. Obama named veteran Delaware Senator Joe Biden to share the Democratic ticket with him. He believed that Biden’s experience in foreign policy and appeal to working-class grassroots voters would

strengthen his chances. As for McCain, he made what proved to be a highly controversial choice in selecting first-term Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. Palin's folksy appeal, good looks, right-wing views, and relative newcomer status attracted some support, especially among conservative women and the religious right. But many Americans, and media experts in particular, questioned her experience and preparedness for the job. Given McCain's age (72) and the uncertain state of his health, Palin would be only "a heartbeat" from the presidency should the Republicans prevail in November. In her debate with Biden, watched by a record number of Americans, Palin held

her ground but appeared uncomfortable when asked questions that required her to deviate from her well-rehearsed "talking points."

For Canadians, who were temporarily distracted from the ongoing drama south of the border by their own relatively short federal election campaign and its inconclusive result, the U.S. presidential race remained fascinating and relevant. When the final results poured in, Canadians understood that they would have to deal with a new president and administration in Washington that would be focusing on important economic and foreign policy issues, including trade, the economic crisis, border security, and the war in Afghanistan.

## To Consider

1. What evidence was there that a growing number of U.S. voters were turning to Barack Obama and the Democrats in the closing weeks of the U.S. presidential election race?
2. Why was the election decided by the results in a handful of key "battleground" states?
3. Why did Republican presidential candidate John McCain try to distance himself from President George W. Bush's administration in the campaign?
4. What emerged as by far the most important issue in the election? Why?
5. Why was McCain's choice of a vice-presidential candidate so controversial?
6. Why is the U.S. election of such interest and importance to Canadians?
7. In your view, were the results of the election good or bad for Canada? Why?

# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## Video Review

### Did you know . . .

U.S. presidential elections are held every four years on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. They always occur during leap years.

### Did you know . . .

Unlike in Canada, U.S. television networks are not forbidden to broadcast election results from Eastern states while voters in the West are still casting their ballots. In the case of a landslide for one candidate, this usually discourages voters who planned to support the loser from bothering to go to the polls. But in a close race, it could motivate them more strongly to show up and influence the final result.

Respond carefully to the questions below as you view the video portion of this story.

1. Who was the victor in the 2008 race for the U.S. presidency?

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2. What characteristics make Barack Obama such a unique politician in the United States?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What role has the military played in John McCain's life?

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\_\_\_\_\_

4. What issue dominated the campaign in its final weeks?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What is the "L" word? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Who was the vice-presidential candidate for the Republicans \_\_\_\_\_ and Democrats \_\_\_\_\_?

7. In your opinion was Palin a help or a drag on the McCain campaign? Explain.

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8. What role did lingering racism play in the campaign?

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9. Outline your personal reaction to the results of the recent American election.

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# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## *Profiles of the Vice Presidential Candidates*

### Further Research

The March 2008 CBC *News in Review* story “The Road to the White House” contained profiles of presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain.

### Quote

“Remember when the world used to trust us? When they looked to us for leadership?”  
— Joe Biden (*Toronto Star*, August 30, 2008)

### Definition

*Bipartisan* is a much-used word in U.S. politics and refers to the practice of two political parties working together to resolve problems or frame legislation.

### Joe Biden, Democrat

When Barack Obama chose veteran Delaware Senator Joseph R. (Joe) Biden to be his vice-presidential running mate shortly before the Democratic Party’s national convention in Denver in late August 2008, he opted for someone with an impressive record of legislative experience, especially in the all-important area of foreign policy.

As chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations ([www.senate.gov/~foreign](http://www.senate.gov/~foreign)), Biden is well versed in a number of foreign-policy issues and is a strong critic of the Bush administration’s Iraq policy, even though he initially supported the 2003 U.S. invasion of that country. Biden has held his Senate seat since first winning election in 1972 at the age of 29. Shortly after his election, he faced a major personal tragedy when his young wife, Neilia Hunter, and their infant daughter, Naomi, were killed in a Washington, D.C., car accident, in which Biden himself suffered serious injuries. For a while, he considered leaving politics but was persuaded to stay on in the Senate by a number of prominent Democrats, including veteran Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy. In 1988, Biden made a bid for his party’s presidential nomination. However, he was forced to withdraw from the contest in disgrace after it was revealed that he had plagiarized parts of his speeches from then British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock. Shortly after that setback, he collapsed from a brain aneurism and had to undergo two major surgeries.

In 2008, he made another attempt to win the Democratic presidential nomination, but withdrew early in the race after failing to attract much support. Although he did not publicly endorse

either of the two main candidates—Senators Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton—he remained in close contact with Obama and agreed to serve as his vice-presidential candidate. Besides the depth of his legislative experience and his ability to forge a bipartisan consensus on a number of key foreign-policy issues, it was believed that Biden’s folksy appeal and working-class roots would help Obama in key Northeastern states.

White working-class voters in all-important states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania were not initially attracted to the urbane, intellectual African-American Obama, tending to prefer Hillary Clinton in the primaries held there in the spring of 2008. Biden describes himself as the “Senator from Scranton,” referring to the industrial eastern Pennsylvania town where he grew up and has long been an advocate of “bread and butter” issues of concern to working-class voters. Party strategists hoped that Biden’s place on the ticket would help to shore up this much-needed base of traditionally Democratic supporters and propel both him and Obama to victory in November 2008.

Biden has gained a reputation for bluntness and plain speaking and sometimes has a tendency to wander off-message, much to the chagrin of Democratic strategists. An unfortunate example of this occurred late in the campaign, when he was addressing a group of influential party fundraisers. Alluding to the likelihood that the newly elected U.S. president would face a major foreign-policy test early in his administration, Biden encouraged his partisan audience to stand behind Obama, given his lack of experience on

**Did you know . . .**

At one time, the husband of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was a supporter of the Alaska Independence Party, which favoured secession of that state from the United States.

the job. McCain and the Republicans seized on this off-the-cuff and hasty comment to reinforce their claim that U.S. voters should be wary of electing someone without extensive experience, especially when the United States faced many enemies in a dangerous world.

**Sarah Palin, Republican**

When John McCain announced that Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was to be his vice-presidential running mate at the end of August 2008, many media commentators and voters alike shook their heads and asked “Sarah who?” Palin was a relatively unfamiliar figure on the U.S. political scene, despite the fact that the conservative magazine the *Weekly Standard* had named her “America’s most popular governor” in 2007. Before being elected Governor of the vast, oil-rich state in 2006, Palin’s only political experience had been at the municipal level, where she served as mayor of the small town of Wasilla, from 1996 to 2002. As Governor, Palin had earned herself a reputation for challenging the entrenched special interests in her own Republican Party and the state itself. She had defeated the incumbent governor, Frank Murkowski, becoming the first woman and, at the age of 42, the youngest person to win the state governorship. In office, she raised taxes on big oil companies and negotiated a deal with a Canadian firm to build a natural gas pipeline linking Alaska to the continental United States.

But Palin’s governorship and vice-presidential campaign were also marked by controversy and scandal. She faced a legislative investigation into her role in the firing of her sister’s ex-husband as a state trooper, which resulted in her being found guilty of an “ethical lapse” if not an actual abuse of her power. Her lavish spending habits, including charging the state for her personal appearances at

religious gatherings and her insistence that her large family entourage travel at public expense to her campaign stops across the country, have also raised eyebrows. Her announcement that her 17-year-old unmarried daughter was pregnant caught some by surprise. The large amount of money the Republican Party spent on her designer outfits and makeup during the campaign appeared to contradict her image as a middle-class wife and mother.

But what concerned most political and media observers, including influential figures in McCain’s own Republican Party, was Palin’s lack of experience at the national level and her apparent inability to address key domestic and foreign policy issues in an informed and knowledgeable way. Her reluctance to appear at news conferences and her uncertain performance in the rare interviews she did give attracted much negative attention, making her the target of political satirists. The popular television show *Saturday Night Live* invited her to make a guest appearance with comedian Tina Fey, whose uncanny resemblance to Palin and ability to mimic her well-rehearsed answers to reporters’ questions created a national sensation.

Before McCain nominated Palin, his acquaintance with her had been very brief. But over the advice of many of his senior advisors, he chose the first-term Alaska Governor because he was convinced that her very lack of experience and low profile on the national political scene might resonate with voters. Republican strategists were counting on Palin’s solid right-wing credentials on social issues such as abortion and gay rights. Her support for guns and an aggressive pursuit of the war on terrorism and the military effort in Iraq would appeal strongly with the conservative Republican base, a voting

**Did you know . . .**

The somewhat elderly John McCain (72) has survived three bouts with cancer. If elected, McCain would have been the oldest person ever to be elected U.S. president. The oldest to date is Ronald Reagan, who was 69 when first elected in 1980. Do you think that a candidate's health or age is a legitimate subject of concern for voters? Explain.

bloc essential for victory. This group of voters had not been overly enamoured of McCain, and it was hoped that Palin's presence on the party ticket would ensure their loyalty. The fact that she was a young, good-looking woman was also seen as an asset, particularly among younger voters and women who might identify themselves with the self-styled "hockey mom" from Alaska. Despite Palin's status as a relative unknown, she had attracted the attention of influential U.S. conservative journalists and political advisors who recognized her strengths and potential appeal over a year before she joined the Republican ticket. One of her most prominent backers, William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, had actually referred to her as his "heartthrob," and right-wing television commentator Rush Limbaugh told her in an interview that he was "in awe of her."

Palin's campaign appearances before adoring Republican crowds were enthusiastic and boisterous, but there

remained serious doubts as to whether her presence on the ticket would prove to be an asset on Election Day. While she certainly had her supporters among the party's right wing of social conservatives, many Americans held grave doubts about her qualifications to assume the vice-presidency and possibly become president should McCain prove unable to continue in the office as a result of age or ill health. Palin's negative numbers in opinion polls rose steadily in the closing weeks of the campaign, and despite the media attention and undeniable enthusiasm her candidacy had generated, it remained far from clear that she would win a significant number of much-needed new voters to the Republican ticket.

Source: "Joe Biden" and "Sarah Palin," *The New York Times* online, <http://topics.nytimes.com>, "Biden's brief," by Ryan Lizza, *The New Yorker* online, Oct. 20, 2008, and "The insiders" by Jane Mayer, *The New Yorker* online, October 27, 2008, [www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008)

## Analysis

1. What are the main strengths and weaknesses that vice-presidential candidates Joe Biden and Sarah Palin brought to their parties' respective tickets?
2. In what ways are both Biden and Palin different from their running mates, Barack Obama and John McCain?
3. Why did Sarah Palin attract so much media attention after she was nominated to be the Republican vice-presidential candidate? Do you think this attention was mainly positive or negative? Why?
4. What kind of president do you think a) Biden and b) Palin would make, should either of them have to assume the office? Be specific.

# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## *The Main Issue: The Economy*

### Quote

“It is that promise that sets this country apart—that through hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams as well.”  
— Barack Obama in his nomination acceptance speech on August 28, 2008

The uncertain and increasingly worrisome state of the U.S. economy emerged as by far the most important issue in the presidential election race during its final weeks. Few observers of the campaign would have predicted this early in 2008 when the first state caucuses and primaries were being held. At that time, the U.S. economy was performing well and growing strongly, trends that were viewed as clearly favouring the Republicans' chances of holding on to the White House in November. But since then, an implosion in the U.S. mortgage market, triggering a wave of foreclosures and rising financial insecurity, led to a major economic crisis affecting the stock market and consumer confidence. Along with this, rising gas prices and unemployment placed a growing number of Americans in a position of grave economic instability, leading some to fear that the much-predicted recession was going to lead to a full-blown economic depression akin to that of the 1930s. The rate of growth in the U.S. economy slipped from four per cent to 0.6 per cent in the final two quarters of 2007, rebounding to 0.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2008 and 3.3 per cent in the second. But along with this, American businesses were struggling with higher prices for raw materials, declining sales, and slumping export markets for their goods.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)) in August 2008, almost 90 per cent of Americans stated that the state of the economy would be a very important factor influencing their choice of presidential candidates. This appeared to provide an advantage to Democratic challenger Barack Obama over John McCain, his Republican opponent. Many Americans held the discredited administration of President George W.

Bush largely responsible for not dealing effectively with the nation's economic woes, and they linked McCain, a fellow Republican, to these failed policies and inaction. Bush acted to resolve the subprime mortgage crisis, in which many Americans were losing their homes after falling behind in their monthly mortgage payments, and actually took over two large mortgage companies because of the risks they had posed to the economy. But to a growing number of Americans, Bush's measures were a case of “too little, too late.” They were also skeptical of McCain's promises to fix the economic mess with his promises of tax cuts and curbs on government spending.

For his part, Obama was promoting tax relief for middle- and working-class families while vowing to roll back the Bush tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. He also called for an overhaul of the nation's failing health-care system and a renegotiation of trade deals, including NAFTA, to protect American jobs in the vulnerable manufacturing sector of the economy. As senators, both candidates voted in favour of a controversial \$700-billion bailout package passed by both houses of the U.S. Congress to rescue failing banks and financial institutions from collapse. Despite the fact that many Americans resented their government's use of tax revenues to come to the aid of the bankers while they were suffering economic hardship, both Obama and McCain defended their positions, arguing that the alternative to the bailout package would be an economic meltdown similar to the great stock-market crash of 1929.

Obama's case was strengthened by the widely held perception that the policies of the Republican administration of President Bush had generally favoured the interests of the rich of Wall Street

rather than those of the middle-income Americans of Main Street. The rising levels of economic inequality in the country, especially the fact that the incomes of the top one per cent of Americans equaled those of the bottom 20 per cent, gave credence to Democratic allegations that the wealthy had benefitted inordinately from Bush's tax policies. On the other hand, McCain's repeated statements that the fundamentals of the U.S. economy were strong did little to reassure anxious voters that he was really in touch with their concerns. One significant and potentially disturbing aspect of the current U.S. economic crisis was the rise in protectionist sentiment in the country and the growing tendency among some hard-pressed American workers to blame foreign countries and immigrants for their problems.

Although the serious state of the economy had established itself by far as the central issue of the final months of the U.S. presidential election campaign, the candidates were also debating other topics. Among the most important of these were foreign policy questions such as how to end the war in Iraq, how to deal with the potential nuclear threat posed by Iran, and how to crush the growing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. At the same time, Obama and McCain also expressed conflicting views and positions on other issues such as national security, health-care and educational reform, climate

change, immigration, and abortion. The traditional "left-right" divide between the Democratic and Republican parties on such issues remained reasonably clear, although the polarization of opinion in the country, especially on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, appeared to be less intense than in the 2004 election. In that race, President Bush and his chief political strategist, Karl Rove, had energized the right-wing, evangelical Christian components of the Republican base to turn out en masse to ensure their hold on the White House. But four years later, with growing apprehension about the economy and increasing hostility to big business and the political party that appeared to be favouring its interests, the tide seemed to be rising for Barack Obama and the Democrats, particularly in the parts of the country that had been hit hardest by the economic slump. And McCain's late-campaign accusations that Obama was a "socialist" whose proposed tax increases on wealthy Americans would "spread the wealth around" did not strike much of a chord outside the traditional Republican base of right-wing voters who were backing him anyway.

Source: "Vote USA 2008 issues: Economy," and "US election issues guide," BBC News online, <http://bbc.co.uk>, and "Maybe the rich are the problem," by Linda McQuaig, *Toronto Star* online October 21, 2008, [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com)

## Inquiry

1. Why was it surprising to many observers that the state of the U.S. economy emerged as the most important issue of the 2008 election campaign?
2. Why were John McCain's links to President Bush a liability for him during the campaign?
3. What were the main factors leading to growing concern about the health of the U.S. economy? How did both Obama and McCain seek to address them in their policies?
4. Why did economic issues likely give Obama the advantage over McCain in the election?
5. In your view, how might U.S. economic woes affect Canadians?

# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## *A Tale of Two Battleground States*

### Note

This section of *News in Review* was written in the days before the election results were tallied.

### Did you know . . .

Besides voting for the next president, U.S. voters will also be casting ballots for all 435 members of the House of Representatives and 34 of the 100 senators. In addition, many states will also be electing governors and state representatives. In California, voters will be asked to vote on a number of ballot initiatives or propositions, similar to referenda in Canada.

Although Americans in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia will cast ballots in the presidential election, the residents of a few key “battleground” states where the contest is close are the only people likely to see much of the candidates during the last weeks of the campaign. This is because the new president will not be elected by the direct popular vote of all U.S. citizens. Instead, the winner will be decided by a majority of votes in the Electoral College. This body, unique among Western democracies, was created under the U.S. Constitution as a way of guaranteeing the rights of the states to have a major say in determining who would become president. The U.S. Founding Fathers also intended it to serve as a check against the will of the majority, which they feared might sometimes lead to unfortunate or even dangerous results if the president were to be elected directly by national popular vote.

The Electoral College consists of 538 members, and each state has a number of electoral votes equal to its total representation in the two houses of the U.S. Congress. Since each state has two senators and a number of members of the 435-seat House of Representatives based on its population, larger states such as California, New York, Illinois, Texas, and Florida are of far greater electoral significance than smaller ones like Rhode Island and Wyoming. The District of Columbia, which has no seats in Congress, receives three electoral votes. A simple majority of 270 electoral votes is enough to win the presidency, and it is mathematically possible to be elected president by carrying only 11 of the largest states while losing all the rest. This is because in all but two states

(Maine and Nebraska) electoral votes are allocated to the successful candidate on a “winner-take-all” basis.

The two most populous states with the largest number of electoral votes are California and New York, and both are regarded as solidly “blue,” or Democratic. It would be a major upset if John McCain were to carry either of them in the 2008 election. Conversely, another large state, Texas, is just as firmly in the “red,” or Republican, camp, as are many other smaller states in the South and Midwest. This all means that the race for the White House tends to focus on a relatively small number of “swing” or “battleground” states that could go either way and whose votes will determine the winner of the election. Among these are Florida, Ohio, Colorado, Missouri, Iowa, Nevada, and Virginia. Here is a profile of two of the most important ones—North Carolina and Pennsylvania—and how they were likely to vote on November 4, 2008.

### North Carolina: From Red to Blue?

The “Tar Heel” state of North Carolina has been generally considered safe territory for the Republicans, but this may not be the case in 2008. The last time the Democrats carried this state was in 1976, when a fellow southerner from nearby Georgia, Jimmy Carter, won it. Since then it has been solidly Republican, with George Bush capturing it by 12 per cent over John Kerry in 2004. North Carolina is a conservative Southern state, but its electoral demographics are changing in a way that may favour Barack Obama in 2008. Although some parts of the state are enjoying an economic boom, many other areas have suffered from a sharp

decline in traditional manufacturing industries such as textiles and furniture making. For many years, North Carolina was represented in the U.S. Senate by Jesse Helms, a one-time champion of racial segregation and one of the most conservative members of Congress. But times are definitely changing in the state, where Democrats gained seats in Congress in the 2006 elections. Black voters, who comprise a significant minority of North Carolina's population, are energized by Obama's candidacy and are expected to cast their ballots for him in record numbers. Young voters who are concentrated in university towns like Charlotte, Chapel Hill, and Winston-Salem are also strongly leaning toward the Democratic candidate. And in the affluent Research Triangle Park in the Raleigh-Durham area, home to the state's growing high-tech industry, Obama's message of change resonates with the young professionals who have moved there recently.

Polls toward the end of the campaign showed Obama pulling ahead of McCain in this once bedrock Republican state, to the surprise of many local political observers. In the words of James Bennett, the editor of the Fayetteville, NC, *Independent Tribune*, "Jesse Helms must be turning over in his grave at the prospect of Obama winning the state's 15 electoral votes. The Republican stranglehold that elected Helms to five terms in the Senate no longer exists." About 600,000 new voters registered to cast ballots in this year's election, a record for the state. Most of them are Democrats. Obama has devoted large amounts of money to blanket the state with television advertisements and has established a strong ground crew to deliver the vote on Election Day. While North Carolina is still considered too close to call, the long lines of people waiting to vote early may be a sign

of how the result will go. Said Maria Adams, the owner of a local employment agency in Greensboro, who lined up for well over an hour to cast her ballot for Barack Obama, "it's worth it. McCain is too hard-line and too old and too erratic. He's out of touch with what matters today, which is the economy."

### **Pennsylvania: McCain's Last Stand?**

During the last two weeks of the presidential campaign, John McCain devoted a great deal of his attention to winning Pennsylvania, a generally Democratic state with 21 electoral votes. He visited the state many times, despite the fact that no Republican has succeeded in winning it since George H.W. Bush carried it in 1988. McCain's choice seemed strange since the opinion polls pointed to a double-digit Obama lead over him in Pennsylvania. But Republicans still believe they have a chance of turning this blue state red, something they must do if they are to have any hope of winning the election and offsetting anticipated losses in other states that George W. Bush carried in 2004, such as Colorado, New Mexico, and Iowa.

Pennsylvania is a state that contains large urban centres such as Philadelphia in the east and Pittsburgh in the west, with a large stretch of small towns and rural areas in the middle. While Obama is expected to sweep Philadelphia, with its large African-American vote and liberal suburbs, the rest of the state may be more fertile ground for McCain. During the Democratic primary in late April, Hillary Clinton trounced Obama by gaining the votes of rural and small-town, white, working-class voters, many of whom are social conservatives and some of whom may even have trouble supporting a black candidate for president. John Murtha, a Democratic Congressman who represents a western

Pennsylvania area, even went so far as to suggest that some of his constituents are actually racist. And state Governor Ed Rendell, a one-time backer of Hillary Clinton, has urged the Obama camp to devote more resources to securing the state in the Democratic column by making the candidate himself more visible there.

For his part, McCain has aggressively taken his message of lower taxes and less government to the conservative western part of the state and has championed his folk-hero, an Ohio man nicknamed “Joe the Plumber” as a symbol of working-class resentment against high taxes and big government. His running mate, Sarah Palin, has also made many campaign stops in the state. McCain strategist Mark Salter believes that former Clinton supporters are ripe for the picking and may be won over to the Republican side. But the state’s economic woes are considerable, with traditional manufacturing jobs in many parts of Pennsylvania rapidly disappearing. And a surge in new voter registration should also help the Democrats.

Although Senator Bob Casey, a strong Obama supporter, is “cautious” about his home state, he believes that “there seems to be something different about this whole effort. The dynamic has changed dramatically, not just around the country, but in particular in Pennsylvania, because of the economic situation.” Casey thinks that older white voters, who may have harboured some initial skepticism toward Obama, have been won over after seeing him perform well in the three debates with McCain. As the campaign entered its final two weeks in late October, Pennsylvania appeared to be one of a rapidly dwindling number of blue states where the Republicans believed they still had a chance of staging an upset.

Source: “Q&A: U.S. presidential election,” and “The shifting election battleground,” BBC News online, <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>, “In Bush stronghold, Obama pulls even with McCain,” by Katharine Q. Seelye, *New York Times* online, October 21, 2008, and “McCain fights to keep crucial blue state in play,” *New York Times* online, October 22, 2008, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

## Analysis

1. What role does the Electoral College play in determining who will become president of the United States? Do you think it is a democratic institution? Why/why not?
2. What are “blue” and “red” states? Why have North Carolina and Pennsylvania been generally considered red and blue respectively?
3. What factors have led to a surge in support for Barack Obama in once traditionally Republican North Carolina?
4. Why does John McCain believe his party still has a chance of capturing Pennsylvania from the Democrats, despite its voters’ traditional loyalty to that party?
5. How did each candidate do in the swing states of North Carolina and Pennsylvania on election night, November 4, 2008?

# AMERICANS CHOOSE A NEW PRESIDENT

## *Activity: The New U.S. President and Canada*

### Opening Discussion

As a class, discuss what you think the impact of a new American president will be on Canada-U.S. relations. How will this country's relationship with its large neighbour and most important trading partner change with Barack Obama in the White House? Which of the presidential candidates was more popular among Canadians, and why do you think this was so? How will the newly re-elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper relate on a personal and political level to President Obama? Do you think Canada's relationship with the U.S. will change in a positive or negative direction with the new President? Why?

### Researching the Issues

Form groups to research the following issues of importance to the state of Canada-U.S. relations:

- a) Trade and NAFTA
- b) The war in Afghanistan
- c) Climate change
- d) Border security
- e) The economic and financial crisis

Each group should prepare and present a summary of the information it was able to gather on these issues and evaluate how the new U.S. President and Prime Minister Stephen Harper are likely to deal with them when they first meet, probably sometime in early 2009.

### Writing a Letter to the New President

Write a letter to the new U.S. President, expressing your reaction to his election and what policies you would like to see him pursue during his administration, with particular reference to issues concerning Canada and Canadians. Provide an e-mail address if possible, since letters to the White House are usually acknowledged.

Mail:

The White House NW  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Phone Numbers

Comments: 202-456-1111

FAX: 202-456-2461

E-mail: [comments@whitehouse.gov](mailto:comments@whitehouse.gov)