

10-2-2008

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Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Nation Braces For Historic Election" (2008). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 8.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/8

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Nation Braces For Historic Election

Is There Anything That Makes This Election Different or Unique?

By *Gleaves Whitney*

Absolutely. Election 2008 is unfolding in one of the most challenging periods in U.S. history. Three elements are converging to create the perfect storm.

First, there is the financial crisis -- the most severe to rock our nation since the Great Depression. Five of our largest investment banks disappeared in a matter of weeks.

On Monday, the market lost more than \$1 trillion. Middle-class Americans are seeing the value of their houses and retirement accounts plummet. The next president will have to be as wise as Solomon to keep fear at bay.

Second, there are the wars. George W. Bush has served as a wartime commander in chief longer than any other American president. Our armed forces are stretched to the max. America's next commander in chief will have to grapple with the ongoing War on Terror, Iraq and Afghanistan -- not to mention Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela and other nations that are hostile to the projection of U.S. power.

Third, the cost of oil has become a major concern in 2008. Gas prices have risen to historic highs, adjusted for inflation. Even if the cost of oil on the global market falls, our nation's limited refining capacity will keep prices at the pump high. For the first time since the 1970s, Americans are focused on conservation and alternative energy sources.

The convergence of these three factors will present tough challenges to the next president of the U.S.

There are at least seven other things that make Election 2008 interesting or unique. It is the first time in our nation's history that either an African-American or woman will occupy the executive office. The election will thus be a huge social leap for the U.S. Also, the fact that John McCain is older than any president might be considered a social leap for senior citizens.

All indications are that young people will vote in record numbers. According to polls, about 75 percent of them will vote for Barack Obama.

Elections are a tug-of-war between change and continuity, but 2008 is the first time since 1952 that neither an incumbent nor a vice president is running. And consider this: since 1976, either a Bush or a Dole has been on every Republican ticket -- a change that is rarely mentioned.

Never before in American history have two U.S. senators been finalists for the White House. This fact gives the lie to the rhetoric about "outsiders" going to Washington to shake up "the system." No, senators are by definition part of "the system," embedded in the political establishment back in their home state and on the national scene. Also revealing is the extent to which Obama especially, and McCain to a lesser extent, received political contributions from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, two of the culprits in the current credit crisis.

There is a generational change that will occur in this election. With Presidents Clinton and Bush passing from the scene after a combined 16 years in the White House, the Vietnam generation is losing its tight grip on political power. Obama and Sarah Palin represent a new generation that is eager to take its place.

Finally -- this may be the most important factor of all -- more Americans are angry with the way things are going than ever before. According to pollster Frank Luntz, three of every four voters believe our nation is on the wrong track. For the past several months, polls have been showing widespread discontent.

Americans are very clear about why they are unhappy. With the economic crisis, war and energy problems, Election 2008 may prove to be one of the most important elections in your lifetime.



This essay originally appeared in the Grand Valley *Lantern* on October 2, 2008.



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(Question from Tara Feenstra, junior, health communications major at Grand Valley)