

# THE NEW PRESIDENT

## Bringing Change to Society or a Product of Societal Change?

The historic election is over – Barack Obama is the 44th President of the United States of America. After an incredibly long primary fight to get by Hillary Clinton, and then a much shorter fight to win the election over John McCain, Obama has taken over with many difficult situations staring him in the face.



Rackaway

But the question is, according to Dr. Chapman Rackaway, *Millikin '90*, a political science professor at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas – has Obama created a societal change with his election, or was his election a sign of the societal change that has been occurring over the past twenty years? He believes the latter is the correct answer, and the former will be seen in years to come.

According to Rackaway, Obama's election is a sign that society has been changing for twenty years, and we're finally seeing the fruits of that change. "The Obama Administration, and the fact that we elected Obama, is a sign that society is changing. Politics as a process is slow, and it's the slowness that's at the core of what I'm saying because politics always responds to societal changes that have happened over the last 15-20 years," he said.

He feels as though we are entering a new phase in the country's race relations, in that for over forty years, integration has been an important part of the United States and citizens have begun to not see race as a factor in someone's ability to do a job. In addition, he hypothesizes that due to Obama's stated openness to further societal change, in the coming years there is likely to be a societal shift in attitudes on gay marriage and other social issues. "Is Obama responsible for that? No. But can he catalyze and accelerate it? Absolutely," Rackaway said.

Rackaway's hypothesis can be put to the test through a number of things that Obama's administration has already

done after coming into office. Those include the use of technologies like e-mail and the web, Obama's vow to change Washington, and his vow to be as transparent as possible. Each of these marks a change in the way things have been done in the past, but each also corresponds to societal changes that have been (or not been) happening over the past two decades.

Throughout his campaign, Obama was an avid user of technology, not only to raise money and galvanize his supporters, but also to communicate his messages and seem closer to the electorate. Even now in his early months in the White House, he has continued to use e-mail and his Blackberry, and has begun using the Web as an information portal to communicate his messages through his weekly YouTube addresses and web sites like [Recovery.org](http://Recovery.org).

This is a perfect example of Rackaway's thought that societal change over the past 15-20 years (i.e. availability and frequent use of technology) is something that Obama has been able to capitalize upon. "We don't realize how closed off presidents have been in the past – how every piece of information has been brought to them," he said. "There's something about having the Blackberry that is very proactive and consistent with his message throughout the campaign of change. It also connects him with people in ways that other presidents weren't able to."

An example that Rackaway uses to illustrate his point of how closed off our country's leaders are is that in 1992, when the first President Bush was running for office, a photo op was created at a Kmart where he went to buy socks. He had *never seen* an infrared barcode scanner. Having been the head of the CIA, executive director of the Republican National Committee, ambassador to China and always in a governmental position, he didn't have to go into stores to buy things. He wasn't connected to the common people. Obama's use of the Blackberry and technology says to the other people using those same technologies that he is

connected to the new mainstream American, the overworked and constantly technologically connected individual with a Blackberry constantly on their hip (much like many Delta Sigs).

This would not have been possible though without that societal change that has happened over the past 15-20 years.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Obama's election is that he won on the platform of changing the way business is done in Washington and essentially changing politics in general. For thirty years, politicians have been saying they were going to change the establishment and Washington, and it really hasn't happened. According to Rackaway, that's because Washington works exactly as it should.

"It's awkward, clunky and fails most of the time, but that's the point," he said. "The founders wrote the Constitution to slow things down, and to get us just past gridlock because the well oiled political machine was going to become tyrannical. There's not really much he can do to change the way Washington works, because he is one guy. He is the president, but he is still only one man."



Rackaway equates the president to the captain of an aircraft carrier. "As president, you are trying to steer an aircraft carrier. You're putting in a whole lot of input, but in the end you're relying on a whole lot of other people who are at cross purposes to you and they're not just going to suddenly abandon their ideology to get on the bandwagon."

For thirty years, there hasn't really been much societal change in Washington, so in going back to the premise of Rackaway's thought that societal change happens over a 15-20 year period, to think that Obama is going to be able to come in and make the major changes he talks about today is not really something that will likely happen. However, an interesting aside is that the things that Obama can accomplish in changing the way Washington works today will help (or hinder depending on who you talk to) those who come into office 15-20 years into the future. Some small changes, in addition to sweeping changes that Obama talks about, can be beneficial for those who come after him.

Speaking of sweeping changes that have occurred in society, according to Rackaway we are now living in a post-TMI (too much information) world. With the advent of social media and social networking (which is a more recent societal change than 15-20 years), people have begun sharing every piece of information about themselves, and expect politicians to do the same.

That brings us to Obama's efforts to be the most transparent president of all time, a vow that he made as he was entering office. "The steps that he made to open up FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests, and to make sure that agencies had FOIA response plans to make their proceedings more open, is great," he said. "It's very overdue because society has decided to move forward with that. If you look at the world we live in, if some of the stuff had been just a little more open, maybe we would have known about some of the questionable lending and administrative practices that happened among these businesses that are now looking for bailout and stimulus money."

Barack Obama is the 44th president of the United States, not because he created the changes that made his candidacy right for the country, but rather because he took advantage of the changes over the past 15-20 years to enhance his candidacy. What kinds of change will he help to create while in office? We'll all have to look back in 2025 to see!

*Dr. Chapman Rackaway is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Fort Hays State University. Prior to his teaching, he spent 10 years as a political consultant helping candidates at every level of government aside from the presidency. He can be reached at [crackawa@fhsu.edu](mailto:crackawa@fhsu.edu).*

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