Special supplement

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Obama's big win in Iowa

# Will voters get the change they want?

**Alan Maass** analyzes the meaning of Barack Obama's victory in the first contest of the 2008 election year.

BARACK OBAMA won the first contest of the Election 2008 primary season in Iowa by an unexpectedly commanding margin in a result that reflects deeper shifts in U.S. politics—the overwhelming popular rejection of the agenda of war and corporate power personified by George Bush, and the desire for change from a political status quo represented by both Bush and Obama's main opponent in the primaries, Hillary Clinton.

For the Republicans, the Iowa caucuses threw the disarray of their party into sharp relief, with a right-wing crackpot and favorite of the Christian Right, Mike Huckabee, anointed as the new frontrunner.

The big news, however, was Obama's victory—an African American triumphing in the first stage of the presidential election, in a country built on slavery and dependent on racist discrimination throughout its history.

But if, like the November 2006 congressional elections, the Iowa vote is another sign of the end of one era, what will a new era bring? Does Obama deserve the hopes placed in him by so many people who hate what politics have become in the U.S. today?

Three months ago, Obama was lagging in the polls, well behind Clinton, whose campaign was based on portraying her as the "inevitable" winner of the Democratic nomination. The initial excitement that had greeted his candidacy seemed to dissipate as Obama continued his evasive rhetoric and refusal to take any strong stand. In Iowa, he was running behind John Edwards, who had devoted most of his campaign's energy and resources to the state.

But when the first primaries finally came into view in November and December—and people outside the political-media establishment began paying closer attention—Obama's campaign started gaining support, particularly among younger voters, for seeming to offer a fresh alternative to political insiders like Clinton who bragged about their "experience" in "getting things done" in Washington.

The conventional wisdom was that Clinton had the loyalty of much of the Democratic Party machine, and this would trump the enthusiasm of Obama supporters when it came to the nitty-gritty work of getting Iowans to take part in the complicated caucus system.

But such calculations were swamped by an unprecedented turnout for the caucuses—nearly twice as large as 2004.

The big numbers benefited Edwards, whose populist, anti-corporate rhetoric sharpened even more in the weeks before the caucuses—but even more so Obama.

Going into the next contest, the New Hampshire primary on January 8, Obama will have the natural momentum that goes to an early winner. But the Iowa vote could have the more substantial effect of cracking the perception that, however much Democratic voters may admire Obama, they would cast their ballots for the more moderate Clinton because she was "electable."

The battle for the nomination isn't over, by any means. In New Hampshire, Clinton has been running ahead of Obama in the polls, her campaign organization is stronger—and she, like Obama, has tens of millions of dollars to devote to the last-minute scramble for votes.

Meanwhile, the media hype over Obama's win will overshadow the narrowness and unrepresentative nature of the entire primary system. The record-smashing turnout for the Democratic caucuses in Iowa was all of 236,000 people—barely 15 percent of the 1.5 million Iowans who voted in the 2004 presidential election, and around 0.1 percent of the voting-age population of the U.S. Bigger states like California and New York moved their elections up this year to the beginning of February, but by the time most Democratic primary voters cast a ballot, the die is likely to be cast for the nominee.

Nevertheless, the result in Iowa does have an importance because it reflects an underlying political shift—away from an era in which the conservative politics of the Republican right dominated, within both mainstream parties and throughout the Washington political system.

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# Will voters get the change they want?

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FOUR YEARS ago, Howard Dean—the one contender for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination who challenged the Bush White House on the Iraq war, even if the criticism was more rhetorical than substantive—was the favorite to win the Iowa caucuses. He came in a dismal fourth.

The winner was John Kerry, the choice of the party establishment. The mainstream media analysis was unanimous—Democratic voters had passed over the candidate who more closely represented what they believed in to support the one who was more "electable," and therefore appealing to conservative voters.

The consensus about Iowa in 2008 couldn't be more different. Even Hillary Clinton, in her concession speech, adopted the "change" mantra of Obama and the other candidates. "We have seen an unprecedented turnout here in Iowa," she said, "and that's good news because today we're sending a clear message that we're going to have change, and that change will be a Democratic president in the White House in 2009."

Whatever else they disagree on, almost no one thinks Clinton is wrong about the party affiliation of the next president—and that conclusion was underlined by the strange circus sideshow of an event that the Republican caucuses in Iowa were.

The big winner was Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist minister and governor of Arkansas who doesn't believe in evolution, *did* believe until recently in quarantining HIV/AIDS sufferers, and regularly displays a George Bush-like (though more good-natured) ignorance of basic facts about the world today.

This man of "compassion" claims he will expel 12 million undocumented immigrants from the U.S. within months of taking office—a promise that won him the endorsement of the founder of the anti-immigrant Minutemen vigilantes.

Yet Huckabee won in Iowa by as commanding a margin as Obama over the one-time Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney—despite Romney dipping into his personal fortune to fill the airwaves with increasingly desperate attack ads.

Going into New Hampshire, the presidential nomination of the Republican Party is up for grabs among a motley collection of mean-spirited law-and-order fanatics, anti-immigrant bigots and second-rate businessmen.

This is a consequence of the crisis of the Bush administration—mired in the failing occupation of Iraq, despised for its shredding of the Constitution and responsible for the steadily worsening mess of an economy.

The dissatisfaction with Bush and the Republicans that manifested itself in the Democratic landslide in the November 2006 congressional elections hasn't gone away, despite the failure of the Democratic majority in Congress to make good on its promises.

Republican leaders—the honest ones, anyway—know they are in for a hiding on Election Day 2008. As Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), once considered a possible contender for the nomination, said last year, the Republicans have "been hijacked by incompetency—I think that's what has driven the Republican Party right off the cliff…This election next year will begin a reorientation of our party—both parties, American politics. The American people will demand it."

As the *Wall Street Journal* wrote before the Iowa caucuses—in an article headlined "An Epochal Battle"—"This year marks the end of what can be considered the Reagan-Bush era in American politics that began when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980. In six of the last seven general elections, a candidate named Reagan or Bush has appeared atop a national ticket, defining a brand of internationally engaged conservatism that has been the dominant strain in American politics for more than a generation."

THE IOWA caucus turnout for Obama will be viewed, and rightly so, as a vote for change by an electorate fed up with seven years of George Bush and arrogant Republican rule. That *is* the primary reason for Obama's swelling support, especially among younger voters and those being drawn into elections for the first time.

But given the policies that Obama actually stands for, those hopes will be disappointed.

Obama's appeals to "hope" and "change" disguise much more moderate political positions—positions which are, in fact, closer to the Republican agenda that people reject in growing numbers than either he, his fellow Democrats or the media that cover them ever let on.

On the central issue of the Iraq war, for example, Obama talks proudly about opposing the invasion in 2003, before he became a senator, in contrast to Clinton, who voted for authorizing the war. But he has far less to say about his votes to fund the war in subsequent years.

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At one candidate's debate, he refused—like Clinton and Edwards—to say that he would withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq by 2013, the end of the next president's first term. In fact, his actual proposal would keep tens of thousands of troops in Iraq indefinitely to "protect" U.S. interests, "fight terrorism" and train Iraq troops.

Clinton and Edwards aren't any better. Among the three, the real differences are not so much about policy as "tone, style and generational image," wrote the *Washington Post's* Dan Balz.

For example, on the issue of health care, both Clinton and Edwards criticize Obama for putting forward a plan on health care that would leave some Americans without coverage. But Clinton and Edwards want to close this gap with mandates that would require the uninsured to buy substandard policies from private insurers.

For all their verbal skirmishing, the health care proposals of all three have something more basic in common—acceptance of the role of private insurance in the system and rejection of any meaningful steps toward a single-payer system that offers a real solution to the health care crisis.

Then there's the role of money—always the hidden-in-plain-sight aspect of American elections.

Obama and Clinton have broken all fundraising records for a competitive race, taking in more than $100 million each in donations. They aren't all in small contributions, either. Corporate America has shifted from its traditional first choice of the Republicans, and poured money into Democratic campaigns, with Clinton doing the best of any candidate in the "Wall Street primary."

Obama's victory in Iowa is a further sign of the desire for political change, and the Democrat candidates—Obama, Edwards, even Clinton—have shifted their rhetoric to the left in reaction. But in terms of their concrete policies, the major Democratic candidates remain in the business-friendly mold adopted by Bill Clinton the last time the Democrats were in the White House.

This is why the Republicans—even though they are all but certain to be crushed in November—have still been able to set the terms of the political debate on certain key questions.

In the past, abortion and equal marriage rights were the hot-button issues. This year, the Republicans have seized on immigration as the one question where their scaremongering might win some support. Because the Democrats refuse to pose an alternative, hard-right positions on immigration once considered to be at the fringe are now the common ground for both parties.

Thus, at the most recent Democratic debate in Iowa, every candidate promised to take on "illegal immigration." For his part, Edwards, with his anti-corporate populism, said he would support a path to citizenship for the undocumented, but not "until they learned to speak English."

It's not surprising that caucus-goers in Iowa—young ones in particular—preferred Obama's vague message of change over Clinton's tired claims about her vast "experience" and Edward's posturing as an anti-corporate crusader in spite of his career as a rich tort lawyer.

Obama's victory will be seen as a sign that people are voting for their hopes that the next president will make fundamental changes in Washington. In exit polls, Democratic caucus-goers said their biggest concerns were about the economy, health care and the war, not the experience or "electability" of the candidates.

But Obama isn't any more likely than the other Democrats to meet these hopes. The real alternative to the right-wing agenda has to be built from the ground up—in struggles of working people fighting for what they deserve.