

**The 2008 Presidential Election
In the Context of Critical Elections**

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A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
— North American Area Studies —
Faculty of Humanities

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University of Oslo
Spring 2011

Abstract

This study examines the 2008 presidential election in the context of critical elections, applying V. O. Key's definitions. The primary sources are newspapers and magazines acquired in the United States the first week after the election, and the secondary sources were chosen among scholars acknowledged for their work on elections and voting, like David Lawrence, David Mayhew and Arthur Paulson. The 2008 election was expected to be both significant and extraordinary, due to the considerable polarization within the American electorate in the years after the invasion in Iraq. After the financial crisis exploded in September 2008 it was more or less expected that the Democrats would win the election in November. The exploration shows that the election had some aspects compatible with a critical election, liker voter concern and a high voter turnout, but mostly, Obama's victory turned out to be a combination of his charismatic personality in combination with his political gifts and well-run campaign. Also the fact that he spent considerable time and money in strongly Republican states proved to be a smart strategy. Obama's victory was also to a great extent secured by high voter turnout among non-whites more than by the traditional criteria for critical elections. This was evident in the four former Republican states investigated in this thesis. Enthusiasm and expectations of a new era, not only voter concern influenced the electorate. This was also reflected in the primary sources applied in this thesis. Pride, enthusiasm, hope for the future and above all, the racial aspect of the election permeated the media's coverage. The presidential elections in 1968 and 1980 are explored according to Key's definitions, as these two elections are the two post-World War II elections most suitable for comparison to the 2008 election. The analysis shows that Obama's victory has most in common with Reagan's victory. In both elections the charismatic candidate and his smooth campaign seem to have mattered more to voters than the party itself.

The thesis claims that by including campaign techniques and charismatic candidates in to Key's definitions would be to expand his intentions too far, but future scholars might come to re-define the conceptualization of critical elections so that modern elections will fit in to the concept. This study found that the 2008 presidential election most of all was an election where the racial barrier was forced, and where the concept change we can believe in appears to have resonated with many Americans. Scholars have not discussed and analyzed this election thoroughly yet, and future scrutiny might come to other conclusions.

Acknowledgement

A special thanks to my son Max for extensive help with the layout of the thesis and also with all other necessary technicalities that his mother was grateful not having to handle herself. It is necessary also to mention the rest of my family for their support and encouragement.

Thanks to Professor Dr. David Mauk for his help and advice throughout the process.

To my Wonderful and Loving Family: Ragnvald, Max and Henriette.
May You Never Forget the Magic Moment We Shared at MSNBC,
Rockefeller Plaza, New York, November 4, 2008

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis analyzes the 2008 presidential election and determines to what extent the election satisfies the criteria of the acknowledged American political scientist, V. O. Key, for defining a “critical election.” In the political history of the United States critical elections represent a pendulum swing that causes significant and lasting changes in American voting behavior and party loyalty. Those elections have from time to time come to change the electoral map considerably, creating new voting coalitions and altering the structures of political power between the two major parties. On election night, November 4, 2008, president-elect Obama proclaimed that “change has come to America,” and indeed his victory was different and significant. However, every president-elect asserts that his or her victory will alter the nation and secure a durable change. Presidential elections have always been the focus of widespread attention and analysis, causing writers and scholars to focus on explanations and approaches to include every presidential election in the historical context of so-called “critical elections.” Potential critical elections tend to be analyzed and debated years and decades after the presidents elected in them have left office. These elections often materialize in 25-40 year cycles, which might also indicate a generational change in voting patterns. Scholars seem to agree that no elections after 1932 have qualified unanimously for the label “critical”. This thesis, moreover, addresses the question of whether the traditional criteria for critical elections might prove outdated and/or irrelevant for elections after World War II. Scholars generally agree that the critical elections in American political history are those that took place in 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932.¹ V. O. Key was the first to introduce the term critical election in his seminal work “A Theory of Critical Elections” in 1955. He defined a critical election as

¹Walter Dean Burnham, “Critical Realignment. Dead or Alive?”, in *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, ed. Byron E. Shafer et al. (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 101

one in which

Voters are... unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement is relatively high, and in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate. Moreover, and perhaps this is the truly differentiating characteristic of this sort of elections, the realignment made manifest in the voting in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding elections²

Not all scholars agree on the criticality of all five elections mentioned above. V. O. Key includes only the 1896 and the 1932 elections, while professor of political science Arthur Paulson, who has published several papers on electoral politics and democracy, focuses mostly on the 1968-72 period, and stresses the 1968 election as a significant critical election. He claims that realignment theory is a useful device when approaching the analysis of American elections and asserts “dealignment should be understood as realignment by other means”.³ He thereby implies that Key’s definition is not to be interpreted too restrictively. David G. Lawrence is also a professor of political science who has studied voting, elections and political participation. His approach is interesting because he sees post 1968 elections more in terms of friction between realignment and dealignment theories, and asserts that there are other applicable reasons for the decline of the Democratic majority.⁴ Lawrence also points out that critical elections often are preceded or followed by periods of “realignment.” Realignment happens when political groupings are split up or starts to oppose each other.⁵ Signs of change emerge, and new political groups are established. Lawrence claims that realignment is “gradual shifts in the balance of party forces caused by changes in the social composition of the electorate.”⁶ A period of realignment often leads to a critical election, where such changes are manifested. According to Lawrence, “dealignment theories” are useful since they seem to explain changes in non- political aspects, such as the development of media and educational levels of voters. Lawrence further implies that the growing lack of party loyalty dismisses the significance of the traditional realignment theories.⁷ Another professor of political science,

²David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 13 and V. O. Key, “A Theory of Critical Elections”, *Journal of Politics* 17 (February 1955), 3-18

³Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 1

⁴David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), xiv

⁵Everett Carl Ladd, “Like Waiting for Godot”, in Baron E. Shafer (edt), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 25

⁶ibid, 3

⁷ibid, 6

Walter Dean Burnham focuses on “party systems,” interrupted by critical elections. Since he has not presented any material on post 1960 elections, however, he will not be as relevant to this study as the work of Paulson and Lawrence. Some, such as the professor of political science, David Mayhew, reject both the ideas of realignment and critical elections.

The result of the 2008 presidential election has been claimed to be the consequence of a possible realignment that started with the 2006 midterm election when the Democrats for the first time since 1992 enjoyed the majority in both chambers of Congress. These Democratic victories led to the strong expectation that the Democrats would win the 2008 presidential election, and sustain or even increase their majorities in Congress. This thesis focuses mainly on the presidential election of 2008, but it is also important to include the results of the general election of that year as well in some of the analyses. The 2010 midterm election is not part of this exploration.

The study does not include all of the five previous critical elections previously mentioned as they would prove irrelevant to the analyses of the 2008 election, so the choice to concentrate on the 1968 and the 1980 elections has been made out of both practicality and relevance. As in 2008, there was a considerable voter concern, like the economy and war prior to the elections in 1968 and 1980. Both elections led to divisions within the parties and witnessed either new voting coalitions, or the decline of existing ones. Most scholars agree that a certain distance in time is required to decide on whether a realignment has occurred. Since realignment theories focus on periods rather than elections, and stress durability and processes, but also because of the proximity in time of the 2008 election, this thesis focuses solely on critical elections.

The Historical Context

The historical context for this thesis is primarily the first eight years of the 21st century, with the decade from the late 1960s to the late 1970s as a relevant and essential background for the discussion. America in the 21st century has above all been colored by the terrorists’ attack on September 11, 2001, the invasions in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, the Katrina disaster in 2006, and the financial crisis in 2008. When the primaries started in the beginning of 2008 one could assert that the 21st century so far had “belonged” to George W. Bush and his neo-conservative administration which in many ways had succeeded in turning America in a considerably more conservative direction. After the 9/11 attacks, the “those who are not with us are against us”-ideology

of the Bush administration appears to have resonated with a considerable numbers of many Americans. But eventually, the war in Iraq became more and more unpopular, as it became evident that there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found there, and many Americans began to question the politics of the Bush administration.

At the beginning of the 21st century America was still marked by the 1990s, a decade which the political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed to be “the end of history”. This theory main idea appeared after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the decline of communism, leaving the United States the position as the world’s sole superpower, and therefore ended the balance of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁸ President Bill Clinton represented a nation with a prosperous economy and no visible enemies. Though there had been foreign terrorist attacks aimed at American targets abroad under Clinton, they did not seem to have affected the American public in significant ways or caused general concern. Apart from an attempt to blow up the Twin towers in 1992, attacks perpetrated by foreigners had been on American interests on foreign soil. Americans who entered the ballot box on November 7, 2000, perceived no significant challenges whose solutions were dependent on the victory of one particular candidate. The election results were historic because the Republican candidate lost the popular vote and court actions over the contested recounts to determine which candidate should win Florida’s decisive electoral college votes led the U. S. Supreme Court to pass down a decision which mad George W. Bush the victor.

When Bush took office on January 20, 2001 nothing indicated that he would turn out to be a president whose decisions and initiatives would divide the nation and contribute to a less positive reputation of the United States worldwide. Bush had campaigned as a “compassionate conservative” and he asserted that he would be a “uniter, not a divider”.⁹ The 2000 election was dramatic but has never been identified as a critical election. Bush was reelected in 2004 without significant changes in the electoral map, and he benefited from the general expectation that most Americans are reluctant to change their commander-in-chief during wartime. Neither was the 2004 election defined as a critical election, though there was a definite and growing polarization within the electorate explained by the fact that the Bush administration became more and more unpopular. It might nevertheless be argued that the political and cultural polarization of the first eight years of the 21st century paved the way for a pendulum swing. This is something that often seems to take place after a period during which one party’s

⁸John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004

⁹*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P9

strong ideology has put its distinct mark on politics. This is also what happened in the 1968 election when the liberal, optimistic mood of the Kennedy/Johnson era saw its decline in the victory of Richard Nixon in 1968. The electoral map of 1968 (and 1972) shows radical changes from 1964, with a Republican majority where there used to be a Democratic one.¹⁰ Nixon's victory signaled the decline of the New Deal coalition and the coming decline of the Democratic Party as the nation's majority party.

The enthusiasm for Johnson's Great Society waned heavily in the protests against the war in Vietnam and the extensive government spending required by the numerous welfare programs. Many Americans lost faith in the liberal values that had characterized the first eight years of the 1960s. The civil rights movement was an important factor in the 1960s and contributed to the collapse of the Democratic majority in the South. The 2008 primaries saw the rise and popularity of a rather unknown candidate of mixed race. This is a distinct sign that America has come a long way since the 1960s, and also since Jesse Jackson tried to become the Democratic Party's candidate for presidency in 1984 and 1988. Barack Obama could afford the luxury of running a colorblind campaign due to the changes that had taken place in American society since the 1960s, but he did address race in his speech dealing with the controversial statements made by his African-American minister the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.¹¹ Where as in the 1960s Obama would have been denied a seat at a lunch counter in the South, he now ran for president of the United States. This shows the unique historical context of the 2008 election. According to the expected 25–40 cycles between critical elections there seemed to be the potential for a critical election in 2008.

Historiography and the Conceptualization of Critical Elections

The scholars referred to in this thesis are also those who define and debate the most relevant ideas in this context. Consequently, historiography and definitions are presented together in this paragraph. The idea of critical elections is closely linked to the term critical realignment and as mentioned earlier in this chapter. V.O. Key first applied "critical election" in 1955. On the other hand, as early as 1952 he wrote an article in *The*

¹⁰Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside front cover

¹¹Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 211

*Virginia Quarterly Review*¹², in which the term “party realignment” was presented and explored, but this article is not as well known as the one he published three years later. He emphasizes durability as the main aspect of a critical election, by which he means that changes in voting behavior persists through several elections. This change is often associated with an altered distribution of party support, and is supposed to have lasting effects on the political system.¹³ Key’s example of the 1932 election as critical is a good example of durability as a result of a critical election.

V. O. Key defined critical elections as a situation in which citizens are worried to a considerable extent. This voter concern could then lead to higher voter turnout and eventually develop into an alteration of the existing division between the parties, caused by a movement within the electorate. A critical election, as a result of, or predicting a period of realignment might then be described as an American substitute for more violent changes in political tide, an historic turn of the tide and a confirmation of a change in partisan identity that proves durable. Critical elections sometimes experience the rise of third parties, a phenomenon that makes it difficult for the major parties to gather support for their platform on the issues.¹⁴ Third parties are dealt with later in the thesis, as they tend to appear in both critical and non-critical elections.

Key proposes three elements for a critical election, namely “voter concern, electoral involvement, and alteration of cleavage patterns”.¹⁵ In a critical election voters’ concern manifests itself in a more intense engagement, because they fear that a continuation of contemporary politics will affect their lives in a negative way. One might assert that there is growing demand for political changes. This is often reflected in increased voter turnout in the coming election. Key also introduced the term “secular realignment”, to indicate a gradual change in voter segments; he did this because he did not find his first interpretation sufficient.¹⁶

Arthur Paulson’s focus on modern critical elections as “dealignment as realignment by other means” is probably his main message when it comes to defining and applying the terms realignment and critical elections, and it is an important aspect when it comes to understanding how this point of view leads to his application of the theories to the

¹²V.O. Key, “The Future of the Democratic Party”, *Virginia Quarterly Review* 28, (April 1952), 161–175

¹³Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 1970), 1

¹⁴*ibid*, 10

¹⁵David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 13

¹⁶David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 7

1968 election. In his discussion of an eventual critical election in this period Paulson also introduces several other terms, or modifiers, like *maintaining* elections, *deviating* elections and *converting* elections.¹⁷ Maintaining elections are recognized by small or no changes from one election to another, while deviating elections occurs once or twice during realignment, with the minority party as a winner due to divergence within the majority party or a particular charismatic candidate for the presidency. Paulson's example of a deviating election is Woodrow Wilson's victory in 1912, and the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. David Lawrence employs the same terms and he also refers to and defines these two elections as deviating.¹⁸ In a converting election the majority party is still in power but with a changed coalition in the electorate. Paulson mentions the 1928 election as an example, in which Alfred E. Smith lost the election and some of the old South to Hoover.¹⁹ Paulson disagrees with scholars who claim that since the 1960s voters have distanced themselves considerably from partisan loyalty, without developing a substitute, and therefore the terms realignment and critical elections must be excluded in this context.²⁰ Paulson's arguments are interesting because he represents a new approach to defining critical elections, liberated from the traditional idea that critical elections require strong partisan loyalty. Paulson also presents six points, which he calls "An Alternative Theory of Electoral Realignment and Party Development", with which he defends the period between 1964 and 1972 as a strong realignment period.²¹

David Lawrence is a proponent of the dealignment theory, which explains changes in politics with circumstances not directly associated with politics, like the growth of media and rise in the educational level, which make voters less reliant on party loyalty to make their decisions.²² He admits that the realignment theory is useful when analyzing elections prior to World War II, because of that period's strong party identification, and claims that while dealignment theories are more *ad hoc*, and predicts only change, realignment theories are more able to make definite statements on electoral development.²³ Like Paulson he is intrigued by the post-1960 elections, but concludes that these elections provided *change* but nothing else, and should therefore be explained by the term

¹⁷David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 3

¹⁸David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 14–15

¹⁹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 3

²⁰*ibid*, 6–11

²¹*ibid*, 23

²²David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 6

²³*ibid*, 178–179

dealignment.²⁴

Walter Burnham has a contrary view, claiming that the theories might be applicable today as well, but only to identify when critical elections are not occurring. Like Paulson he includes the 1968-72 periods, but asserts that this was the last time the theories were fruitful since partisan loyalty disappeared more or less after the 1968 election.²⁵ Both scholars include the term “partisan loyalty” as an important aspect of their definition, and claim that this was a significant factor in critical elections prior to World War II. Voters were loyal to their parties, because parties defined and interpreted politics to a greater extent than today. Only in critical elections did voters change their partisan loyalty to a considerable extent. Walter Burnham also describes how the periods between critical elections have their own “party system”, stressing that such systems are another word for “voting systems or electoral-politics system”, and has nothing to do with how the different parties are organized.²⁶ At the end of a realignment period a party system weakens and begins to wane, to make place for a new and stable system after a critical election. David Lawrence also deals with party systems in his approach to a definition of critical elections, and claims that after a critical election the new party system is strong and might use its force to implement new politics. When concern about issues that brought forth the critical election and the new party system begins to erode, one might discover signs of friction within the existing parties. This tension might in some cases lead to third parties.²⁷

David R. Mayhew rejects the idea of critical elections altogether and lists fifteen points to disprove realignment theories.²⁸ His approach is important and will be considered when analyzing the realignment perspective of the 2008 presidential election, but since this thesis does not conclude on whether to apply theories for critical elections or not, his strategy is not given extensive attention. The modifiers “soft” and “hard” are sometimes also applied in order to grade the criticality of different elections, and in this context the 1980 election has been defined as soft realignment.²⁹ But the definitions of terms and

²⁴David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 179

²⁵Walter Dean Burnham, “Critical Realignment. Dead or Alive?”, in *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, ed. Byron E. Shafer et al. (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 107

²⁶Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 1970), 11

²⁷David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 3–5

²⁸David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 14–33

²⁹www.tnr.com/article/america-the-liberal

concepts provide no meaning unless associated with relevant criteria for critical elections and applied to previous elections in this category.

Criteria for Critical Elections

V. O. Key presented three criteria for critical elections in his essay, “voter concern, electoral involvement, and alteration of cleavage patterns”.³⁰ Voter concern is most probably the primary factor for a critical election and the variable that releases the others. Voter concern is another word for frustration, anger and discontent within the voting population. This particular concern is most likely the result of the politics carried out by the sitting administration. Voter concern might be released on a general basis, but is often closely connected to one or more issues that have proved controversial during the incumbent’s term in office. These issues, and the way they are dealt with might be of such a character that voters decide to change their partisan loyalty. Voter concern is often released by unfulfilled expectations, or due to the development of certain incidents, such as the war in Vietnam in 1968, the recession in the 1970s or the financial crisis in 2008. Today, circumstances and comments are presented to us more or less the minute they happen, and politicians are expected to face and comment on incidents without much time for contemplation and analysis. This requires adequate advisers and an ability to read the public mood, and meet voter concern at a reasonable level during campaigning. Voter concern might emerge very quickly, and the media often seize the opportunity to keep the concern alive. Voter concern and particular issues to trigger the public’s engagement are significant factors in every critical election, but those variables might also be present in non-critical elections as well. There was major voter concern and polarization prior to the 2004 election, caused by invasion in Iraq war. Still, no scholars characterized this election as a critical election. But Paulson claims that the 2004 election might be viewed as the start of a new realignment period and experiences a new party system due to the Republican victory in both the Senate and the House.³¹ Voter concern is dealt with in full in chapter four, where Key’s definitions are applied to the 2008 presidential election.

An important consequence of voter concern and particular issues in a critical election is that these variables lead to changes in the electoral map and often see the establishment

³⁰David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 13

³¹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 2

of new political coalitions and a new governing majority. Though Key never mentioned issues they have been a significant aspect of all those elections previously rated as critical. The most distinctive issues were slavery in 1860 and the economy in 1932. The 2008 election was the first election after 1932 when a financial crisis came to dominate the presidential debates, though the economy was an issue in 1992 as well.

Changes in established and expected voting behavior might lead to new voting coalitions. Such changes appear to be influenced by several factors, like declining or changing partisan loyalty, new generations old enough to vote, or a change in the demographical structure.³² Stronger partisan identification is one of the reasons it has been easier for scholars to make earlier elections fit in to the category of critical, especially in the 19th century. Alterations within the electorate often lead to one party's domination of a voter segment or a geographical part of the country otherwise held by the opposite party. A relevant example of this is the 1850s when a long period of party confusion and the establishment of third parties led to a critical election in 1860, when the polarization over the slavery issue contributed to dividing the nation politically and also geographically. The Democrats managed to get a strong hold of the South while the Republican Party established itself as the main party of the Northeastern part of the country.³³ This election also led to Republican rule from 1860 to 1930, only interrupted by the Wilson years, 1912-1920. Paulson describes the realignment of the 1960s as very important in contributing to changes in the political power system in the 1968 election, because the Democrats lost the South and gained the North East, and vice versa for the Republicans.³⁴ The most important and durable voting coalition in 20th century American history is undoubtedly the New Deal Coalition, gathering different groups that had previously not had much in common, like blue collar workers and intellectuals, Catholics and Jews. Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory in 1932 started a process that made the Democratic Party the most significant party in America. This coalition lasted until 1968, when the Democrats lost the South in the presidential election. Though there was a period with Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in the White House, most Americans defined themselves as Democrats in the period between these two elections. We probably saw the same phenomenon in 1980 and 1984 when many Democrats voted for Reagan, being labeled Reagan Democrats.

The two criteria "new voter coalitions" and "change in voting behavior" seem to intertwine, since the one is dependent on the other. But they both include important aspects

³²James L.Sundquist, *Dynamics of the party System. Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, (Washington DC, The Brookings Institution, 1983), 13

³³ibid, 104-105

³⁴Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 23

when it comes to defining, applying and limiting the term critical elections. *The New York Times* online edition claims that the election of Obama led to a new coalition, comprised of women, independent voters, moderates, Hispanics, African-Americans, people of all kinds of educational levels and young people under 45, and above all, first time voters. Voter groups previously Republican that now supported Obama, were mothers and Catholics.³⁵ But it might be argued that most of these groups, like women, young people and non-white ethnics already belonged to the Democratic voter segment.

Critical elections seem to appear at certain cyclic intervals although this cyclic occurrence was not included in the original realignment theory.³⁶ Scholars' prediction that critical elections come in 25–40 year cycles have led to anticipation about coming elections like a “waiting for Godot”-syndrom among American analysts.³⁷ Speculation about when the next one will appear also appeals to the world outside of academia, to journalists and strategists. Like fortune-tellers they begin to analyze and predict the next critical election almost immediately. If the cycle is to be considered a basic reason for critical elections it is a significant question why most scholars and political scientists have not been able to conclude on any critical election after 1932. This is mainly explained in their work by the waning partisan loyalty in the decades after World War II.

Although scholars differ about the number of critical elections in the political history of the United States, there seem to be a general agreement about at least five of them. The first critical election in 1800 signaled a coming change in American party politics when Thomas Jefferson won the presidential election. This was the beginning of the Democratic-Republican Party's rule and the demise of the Federalist Party. This election will not be of importance when discussing the 2008 election, mostly due to the time perspective, which implies a major divergence in social and political circumstances. The same applies to the 1828 election, which brought Andrew Jackson to the White House and contributed to the Democratic-Republican Party's split.

One of the most significant elections in the history of the United States occurred in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln won the presidential race. The 1850s had been a turbulent decade in American party politics, and third parties had come and gone, like the Free Soil Party and the Know Nothing Party. The nation was split along a North - South axis caused by the issues of slavery, the right of states to secede from the union, and the

³⁵www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/us/politics/05poll.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

³⁶Theodore Rosenhof, *Realignment. The Theory That Changed the Way We Think About American Politics*, (Oxford UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 164

³⁷Everrett Carll Ladd, “Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of “Realignment” for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics” in Baron E. Shafer (edt), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 24–37

approaching civil war. After the demise of the Whig party in 1852 the Republican Party emerged and Lincoln became their obvious leader. Ending slavery, and avoiding splitting the nation into two polarized fractions were the foremost goals of the Republican Party, and Lincoln received more than 59% of the votes in 1860.³⁸ The realignment of the 1850s made the Democratic Party the majority party in the South, and an urban immigrant party in the North. The Republican Party took a strong hold in the North Central and the Northeast regions of the country, a division between the two parties that would last for approximately 100 years.³⁹ This election therefore seems to have a strong connection to the 1968 election when these regional coalitions reversed. The realignment of the 1850s led to strong partisanship all over the United States.

After Reconstruction in the South the old issues waned and new groups began to emerge on the domestic scene and claim their rights to a better life. This time it was the farmers, who were heavily provoked by the privileges of the industrial Northeast, its new financial class and who were at the same time facing difficulties with marketing their wheat production, which led them into heavy debt.⁴⁰ New third parties emerged, like the National Independent Party and the Farmer's Alliance. William McKinley won the Presidency in 1896, an election not easily agreed upon when it comes to being defined as a critical election, though Key mentions it. This was a time of industrial growth and a new prosperity among Americans in general. McKinley carried most of the Northeast and the Midwest. He continued the stronghold of the Republican Party in the financial and industrial center of the country, and the 1896 election was the first election not based on the old cleavage between the North and the South. For the first time each party could present its own agenda, and partisan loyalty became stronger again.⁴¹ Third parties vanished and the political map was normalized. In exploring the 2008 election this election proves not to be relevant, due to the political climate in the 1890s, which might not be compared to the 21st century.

The 1932 election signifies the beginning of a new era in American politics. For political scientists and historians who study elections in the context of critical election this election might be called the "king of critical elections". The depression initiated by the 1929 crash came surprisingly to most American politicians, and the 1932 election might be regarded as a protest towards the Hoover administration's handling of the crisis. The depression polarized the voters and made Roosevelt and his New Deal a

³⁸www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1860

³⁹James L.Sundquist, *Dynamics of the party System. Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, (Washington DC, The Brookings Institution, 1983), 102–105

⁴⁰ibid, 107–109

⁴¹ibid, 158

new and durable phenomenon in American politics. This election proved the coming of a new coalition: the White South, labor unions, Catholics, Jews, Northeastern liberal intellectuals and Westerners. The Democrats carried 57% of the popular vote in the presidential election in 1932.⁴² The realignment of the 1930s made the Democratic Party the nation's "majority party for the first time in eighty years".⁴³ This shows that a critical election might appear before a realignment period though there were signals in the late 1920s of a coming change.

If Key's definitions are to be applied conservatively, traditional criteria might prove insufficient for modern elections. Another aspect might be that modern elections have not undergone the same scrutiny as the older ones, and that the complexities of modern society make it difficult to apply the same criteria. Many scholars have dealt with the definitions and limitations of the term "critical", and the disagreement among scholars indicates that the term is not exact enough to cover what it is meant to imply. Furthermore, there is evidently a distinct dissension on its applicability to modern elections. This thesis inclusion of primary and secondary sources tries to find some point of intersection between these two.

Methods and Sources

Primary Sources

The primary sources for this thesis are mainly the newspapers and magazines published immediately after the election, especially *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek*, but also the *USA Today*. *The Time Magazine's Commemorative Issue* of November 17, 2008 provides extensive statistics and numbers for every state of the nation, together with interesting and relevant information and analysis on how people voted according to age, gender and race. The same applies to *Newsweek's* special edition of November 17, 2008. The material presented by those sources might prove useful in deciding on new voter coalitions and an eventual change in partisan power structure. In addition, the *Boston Globe's* online edition from November 9, 2008 has a rather long article and discussion among some scholars and analysts concerning the election in an historical perspective. *The New York Times* (NYT) stands out as one of the most respected and reliable newspapers in the United States. It has a serious image, with qualified journalists and a long tradition of providing and analyzing news and events. The *USA Today* is a

⁴²James L.Sundquist, *Dynamics of the party System. Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, (Washington DC, The Brookings Institution, 1983), 10

⁴³ibid, 214

very different type of newspaper; it appears more tabloid and simple compared to the *Times*. What distinguishes the USA Today from the NYT is also its distribution; it is available in every state across the country, and probably appeals to a larger segment of the reading public than the NYT. Like *The New York Times* it presents extensive coverage and analysis of the election and represents the whole nation more than the New York based paper. The magazines chosen for this thesis, *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine* both enjoy respect in media circles; together with the NYT they attract excellent writers and commentators. When it comes to political magazines in America these are among the foremost and well estimated. *The Boston Globe*, which actually is owned by the NYT, is also recognized as a serious and well-estimated newspaper, but probably more conservative than its owner. The scholars participating in their online debate are well-known scholars and professors. It has proved difficult to find magazines and online articles disapproving of Obama's victory and its relevance, but that does not necessarily imply that these sources, which were in favor of the outcome of this election, will automatically characterize it as a critical election.

Secondary sources

The secondary sources and their main views and definitions regarding critical elections were presented in the paragraph on historiography, terms and concepts. The secondary sources are chosen because of their relevance to the topic, so that scholars that focus solely on *realignment periods*, like James Sundquist are not applied in the deliberation in this thesis. The works of V. O. Key, Arthur Paulson and David G. Lawrence are the most relevant for the thesis. These scholars have a good academic reputation when it comes to research on critical elections and voting. Key's classic work is the starting point for analysis, even though it proves insufficient used alone analyzing the significance of more recent electoral contests. Paulson's *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy* is particularly relevant due to its focus on the 1968 election and the presentation of a new definition of critical elections. Paulson's inclusion of data from the elections in 2000 and 2004 in his analyses makes it even more appropriate for this thesis. Lawrence's work, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority* deals with the post-war era up to the reelection of Bill Clinton in 1996, and is essential because of his approach to dealignment as an explanation of electoral changes after World War II. Walter Burnham's work is also relevant, but the two others are more contemporary. Mayhew is applied as a critical voice in this context.

Methods

The method of this thesis is an exploration of the primary sources on the background of the theory presented by the secondary sources. The comparison between primary and secondary sources depicts the contrasts between immediate enthusiasm and thorough research, a combination considered relevant and interesting to this thesis. This method joins together academia and the news media, applying theories and definitions to findings in newspapers and magazines. In the wake of the election commentators and journalists were eager to comment on and analyze the election, in an effort to decide on its relevance and importance. While the primary sources reveal the instant reactions to the election, often by journalists who witnessed the historical event, the secondary sources display a more profound exploration on the topic of critical elections, often the result of many years of academic work. That does not necessarily indicate that the result of academic research will differ essentially from the predictions of mass media. It might also be a supplement to what has already been argued in the media. The primary sources in this thesis were acquired in New York during the first week following the election, and present the immediate and spontaneous reactions to the event. This circumstance does not automatically imply that they will regard the 2008 election as a critical election. Their immediate responses might also be affected by other relevant factors in the election. The papers and magazines also provide statistical and analytical material important for the interpretation of the election's significance. It could be argued that the chosen primary sources are biased since none on them actually endorsed the opponent John McCain during the election campaigns.

The intertwining of news media and academia is displayed in the publishing of Gerard Pomper's *The New York Times on Critical Elections* and scholars' participation in media debates. The election of Barack Obama was a magic moment to everyone who experienced it and also a gift to reporters and journalists not only in America but also all over the world. Obama proved to be a candidate whose life and experience appealed to extensive media coverage and his media appeal is comparable to that of John F. Kennedy's and Ronald Reagan's. Both public and media undoubtedly love candidates with a certain star quality and charismatic appeal. An argument against a method relying on the analytical presentation of the election in the first week might be that the expectation that something very special and significant have happened overshadows objectivity and realism and overestimates the implications of this particular election. This does not necessarily indicate that a critical election has occurred. But scholars' work, based on the importance of scientific methods and objectivity, often emerges after the first enthusiasm has waned.

They therefore represent a necessary and hopefully scientific counterweight.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 first gives a brief description of the political climate in the 21st century, focusing on the two Bush administrations, followed by a presentation and analyses of the 2008 presidential election from the primaries on with the criteria of a critical election in mind. It also gives a brief account and evaluation of the presidential campaign leading up to the election of Barack Obama. This chapter also approaches and discusses American voting patterns and voting behavior in the 21st century with a comparison to other significant critical elections, and explores eventual changes. The primary sources are most important here because apart from displaying the immediate media response, they interpret and explain the processes in the primaries and during the election.

Chapter 3 further analyzes the 1968 and 1980 elections in a context of criteria for critical elections. This analysis shows why they are of significant importance to the 2008 election. This chapter further discusses why and how the old criteria for critical elections do not fit modern elections. In this respect Arthur Paulson is a main contributor, since he stresses the importance of dealignment theory. Also David Lawrence's arguments are significant in this context since his approach differs from Paulson's. This chapter also investigates the similarities and differences between the five critical elections before World War II, and the two modern, like 1968 and 2008.

Chapter 4 applies V. O. Key's definitions and the findings in the previous chapter to the 2008 presidential election and discusses these thoroughly with regard to a possible critical election. The chapter shows how the 2008 election has more in common with the 1980 than the 1968 election. Both primary and secondary sources are applied in this context. This chapter also presents and discusses findings in the exploration of several different states previously Republican, and displays how other factors than voter concern affected the results. It also describes and analyzes media's response in order to find any indications of a critical election.

Chapter 5. The Conclusion sums up the findings and interpretations from the previous chapters, and reaches conclusions about the eventual criticality of the 2008 presidential election.

Chapter 2

The Bush Years and the Election of Barack Hussein Obama jr.

This chapter deals with the 2008 primaries and the presidential race following the primaries, in order to discover any signs of a forthcoming critical election. First, the chapter presents and explores the Bush administration and its politics, to see if this period carries any indications of a growing voter concern, one important criterion for critical elections. A presentation and analysis of the two George W. Bush administrations preceding the 2008 presidential election is essential in understanding how this election eventually might be characterized as critical. The Bush era is significant in American politics not only because of the many crucial events that took place, such as the September 11 attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the financial crisis, but probably most of all because the way these events were addressed by the Bush administration eventually caused severe polarization within the American electorate. How America votes and why has always intrigued political scientists. Voting behavior has both a sociological and psychological approach, and this chapter tries to identify how these two aspects affect voting in America. The chapter also explains how polarization may be the frontrunner of critical elections, but also how non-critical elections might include polarization as well.

The Bush Years

The political climate in America at the time of the 2000 presidential election did not signify that any particular issues would be significant for the outcome of the election. The debates between the Democratic candidate Vice President Al Gore and the Texan governor George W. Bush focused on prescription drugs and Social Security, and Bush

claimed to have a reputation as a governor that cooperated successfully with Democrats.¹ Neither of the candidates in the 2000 election managed to arouse any particular passion or enthusiasm among voters, and the audiences for the debates declined compared to other elections.²

Al Gore won the majority of the popular vote with 48.4% compared to Bush' 47.9% in this dramatic election.³ A look at the electoral map from the 2000 election shows that Bush actually carried several states that Clinton carried in 1992 and 1996,⁴ and in addition he won all the Southern states. The South is presumably more conservative than the North, and Bush' victory here might maybe be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the moral aspects of Clinton's personality, though Gore appeared as a contrasting candidate in this respect. Al Gore faced the same dilemma as McCain in 2008; he avoided including the incumbent president in his campaign. The fact that Gore is from the state of Tennessee did not give him any advantage; Bush carried this state as well.

During the campaign George W. Bush did not present any particular agenda when it came to foreign policy, and indicated no significant, radical changes to previous policies. On the contrary, Bush did not come forward as a president particularly interested in foreign affairs in the immediate period after taking office. This reluctance to get involved in foreign affairs might be partly explained by America's role as the sole super power after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as mentioned in chapter one. In addition, the economy was good and the enemies more or less invisible. Both Clinton and Bush were later accused of not having been aware of the dangers that threatened the United States.

September 11, 2001 was undoubtedly a day that changed America, and it transformed the president from being more or less invisible on the international arena into a war president with a strongly unilateral approach to dealing with potential terrorist threats. George W. Bush soon displayed his beliefs in the so-called neo-conservative ideology. The interesting aspect of these neo-conservatives politicians is that they had once been Democrats, but left the party when they concluded that it had turned too far to the left in the 1960s. A strong support for Israel came to define their political commitment in the beginning, and eventually they joined hands with the Southern religious fundamentalism that George Bush was a part of. The neo-conservative ideology included an endorsement of financial aid to religious schools, the right to bear weapons and a strong

¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 568

²ibid, 569

³Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), A-12, Appendix

⁴ibid, inside back cover

opposition to abortion and gay rights.⁵ On the international arena they supported the idea that diplomacy and dialogue were traits of weakness and compliance. The neo-conservatives were also quite obsessed with Iraq and saw the September 11 attacks as a golden opportunity to get rid of Saddam Hussein.⁶ While the United Nation supported war in Afghanistan was seen by many Americans as necessary action in order to fight the Al-Qaeda, the unilateral invasion in Iraq was highly debated throughout the American public, and aroused strong emotions and extensive engagement on both sides.

But nevertheless, when Bush defeated John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election the electoral map showed only minor changes; although in addition Bush now also carried New Mexico and New Hampshire.⁷ This is interesting because two particular issues, namely the invasion of Iraq and the threat of terrorism, heavily dominated the debates in the 2004 election. A particular and polarizing issue to dominate the election might be a significant criterion for a critical election, and might also contribute to the establishment of new coalitions in the electorate. In this election one might have anticipated a more distinct change in voting behavior, since the opposition to the war in Iraq was growing steadily throughout 2004, but the general reluctance among the public to change President during wartime, proved to be in Bush' favor. In 2004 the opposition towards the Bush administration was not strong enough to be reflected in changes in the electoral map. It might also be alleged that John Kerry did not show sufficient personal qualities to attract undecided voters that eventually turned out to vote for Bush. But the election emphasized the polarization between the two major parties considerably.

Despite the fact that the electoral map did not change significantly between those two elections the polarization within the American society grew steadily in the years following the 2004 election, and one might assert that the almost 50% who did not vote for the president eventually came to oppose him strongly. The growing unpopularity of George Bush was emphasized in a poll from 2004, where half of the people being asked defined Bush as a "divider".⁸ The increasing anti-Bush "movement" within the American public led to his approval rating down to less than 30% in 2008.⁹ This is very amazing, considering the overwhelming support he received after the September 11 attacks, where

⁵Michael Lind, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 114–118

⁶ibid, 186–187

⁷Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside back cover.

⁸Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State. Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 111

⁹Halvor Elvik, *Dagbladet*, September 7, 2008, 3

90% of Americans approved of their president's approach to the disaster.¹⁰ Polls showed that two-thirds of the American public found the nation going in a very wrong direction.¹¹ It became obvious that this had to do with the circumstances and motives for the invasion of Iraq. Throughout the United States several demonstrations against the war took place; up till now this had been a European phenomenon. Seen from Europe one might interpret this as an American awakening, long expected by Europeans. Such an awakening might be another word for concern and frustration, expected by scholars to manifest itself in changing voting behavior in a coming election.

Eventually, it became evident that the 2008 presidential election would be the most important election in a very long time, and it would definitely also include an ideological aspect as more and more Americans became worried about the neo-conservative ideology that appeared to permeate the politics from the White House. A President who described himself as a born again Christian and claimed that he consulted his heavenly "Father" on important matters, was probably not what many Americans had had in mind when they voted for him. The Bush administration had through two periods tried, and to a certain degree succeeded in moving the nation far to the right, with its emphasis on the clear distinction of good and evil forces in the world, and how to deal with those accordingly. This had also been demonstrated through the so-called Bush Doctrine, which implied the right of the United States to carry out pre-emptive wars.¹² To a certain extent this proved sensible and necessary to many Americans after the terrorist attacks, but eventually it contributed to the polarization of the nation as many people came to question whether this doctrine really made America safer and less exposed to terrorist attacks. In addition people also realized that the Bush administration had contributed heavily to the decline of the nation's reputation worldwide.

Eventually, the war in Iraq proved harder to end than to start and the so-called war on terrorism showed little or no effect. The nation seemed tired of the president's constant focus on terror even though Osama bin Laden was still out there somewhere. Most people now realized that the rather secular Saddam Hussein had no connection with Al-Qaeda, and that the weapons of mass destruction probably existed only in the minds of the neo-conservatives. A feeling of being hoodwinked increased in the American public, and opposition towards George W. Bush' foreign policy became stronger and stronger as the situation in Iraq accelerated. Obama had voted against the war and had little to answer

¹⁰Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 13

¹¹ibid, 13

¹²Bush in a speech to graduates at West Point Military Academy, June 1, 2002

for in that respect, contrary to Hillary Clinton who had supported the invasion.

The Bush administration was also accused of having handled the destruction of the Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 in a dissatisfactory way. It was also held responsible for not having dealt with the economy in a way that could have prevented or diminished the financial crisis. At the end of Bush' second term Americans seemed more preoccupied with foreclosures and mortgages than the terrorist threat. Even among Republican voters there was strong dissatisfaction with their president, and the term "moderate" no longer appeared to be part of the Republican vocabulary. Many Republicans no longer recognized their political identity within the party.¹³ The same phenomenon could be registered in 1968, when Johnson's domestic and foreign policy eventually evoked strong sentiments and opposition, even among Democrats. This also happened in the 1980 election when the disappointments with Carter's presidential performances, led many Democrats to vote for Reagan, in an effort to change the political climate and the course of the nation. Such a decisive voter concern and an expected movement within the electorate might subsequently lead to an altered voting behavior, and a critical election.

Paulson claims that the 2000 and the 2004 elections came to polarize the American society to a considerable degree and when the primaries started in the beginning of 2008 America was indeed a house divided.¹⁴ The Democrats emerged more united than ever before, while the Republicans struggled with deep ideological frustration and a distinct unwillingness to include the incumbent president in the coming election. The election was presumed to be an easy victory for the Democrats who saw the split within the Republican Party as a golden opportunity to take back the White House and secure and even increase the Democratic majority in Congress that was a result of the 2006 midterm election. This was supposedly an election that seemed to fit into the criteria of critical elections, with Key's "voter concern" playing a prominent role. It was crucial for the Democrats to choose a candidate that would both gather the voters and ensure a victory the coming November. But such a significant election should also provide opportunities for unexpected and to some, unbelievable candidates.¹⁵

¹³Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 227

¹⁴Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), ix

¹⁵Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 20

The Democratic Primaries: An Afro-American Senator versus the Former First Lady

An Afro-American senator versus the former First Lady in the Democratic primary appeared to some a setting taken rather from a Hollywood movie than from reality. This was only one aspect that showed how the 2008 primaries would be historical, no matter the outcome of the election. Never before in American political history had a woman senator or a black man waged a seriously considered campaign for the highest office in the nation, an indication of how both race and gender barriers were being forced. This aspect does not in itself indicate a critical election, but critical elections might to a certain degree present a podium for unexpected candidates as the voters more or less consciously are looking for someone who will signify a distinct break with the immediate past. When he decided to run Obama was given rather small chances in the primaries against his opponent, senator Hillary Clinton, the head star of the Democratic Party and the candidate most likely to win the primaries and be nominated as the party's candidate for the 2008 presidential election. Obama had an exotic background as the son of a Kenyan exchange student and a white American woman from Kansas. He had a Muslim middle name and his childhood had been divided by years in Muslim Indonesia and at his white grandparents' apartment in Hawaii. Obama had been elected to the Senate from Illinois in 2004; he was new and rather inexperienced on the national political scene, but at the 2004 Democratic Convention he held what most political analysts claim to be a remarkable speech. The charismatic Obama was immediately predicted to experience a glorious political future, but no one expected that he would run as early as 2008.

The early primaries soon indicated that the two foremost candidates appealed to different parts of the electorate. This might be a signal of both ambivalence and the fact that neither candidate was able to appeal to the whole range of Democratic voters. Some might have regarded Obama as a disturbing element in this context, since many Democrats very early in the process might have got accustomed to the idea of Hillary Clinton as the party's front-runner. But Barack Obama conveyed enthusiasm and aspirations for change, and attracted young people of all races, and also well-educated people of all ages. Hilary Clinton on the other hand, appealed to white workers and people over 65 years of age.¹⁶ Some were afraid that the lack of a candidate that appealed to most Democrats would cost the Party its victory in November. A young, liberal Afro-American versus the politically experienced but also controversial former First Lady proved a hard

¹⁶*Aftenposten*, April 26, 2008, 16 & *VG*, January 5, 2008, 18

choice for many Democrats in the primaries, due to the importance of strategic voting in order to secure a candidate that would actually win the race against the Republican candidate. Since a candidate for the presidency is normally a white, often middle-aged man, both Obama and Clinton at first seemed non electable to many Americans.

Obama's victory in Iowa, a state with 95% white people, clearly showed that Clinton could not count on her experience and gender to ensure her victory. It was also a sign that the racial barriers might fall and that this election would definitely be unlike anything else in American political history. Such circumstances might indicate a critical election, since such elections are likely to present candidates with new or different agendas, but it might also be an indication of changes within American society, both demographically and psychologically. Another important factor in the Iowa victory was Obama's appeal to women, who supposedly would vote for Clinton, which only three in ten actually did.¹⁷ The fact that so many Americans participated in the primaries shows the importance of this election, and how much the voters felt were at stake. But it is also a sign that a woman and a black man engage the voters to a higher degree than middle-aged white men. In critical elections the appeal and enthusiasm of a particular candidate might be of importance, as he or she might signal the fulfillment of new expectations, but such circumstances might also lead to a deviating election, like in 1952. It is also an evidence of the importance of charismatic candidates.

The Democratic primaries very early indicated that they would not be easily determined and that it would prove difficult for the Democratic voters to decide whether Clinton or Obama should be the party's candidate for the 2008 presidential election. The polls early along indicated a close race between Obama and Clinton, with a small lead for Senator Clinton. After being defeated by Senator Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire Obama presented his slogan "*Yes, We Can*", in his concession speech. This proved to be a wise decision, and on January 28, 2009 Senator Edward M. Kennedy endorsed Obama at an event at American University in Washington. The day before, Kennedy's niece Caroline Kennedy had written an article in *The New York Times* called "A President Like My Father".¹⁸ Public support from two members of the influential Kennedy family was regarded very important for a rather unknown candidate at the start of the Democratic primary, and analysts emphasize its significance for the outcome of the primaries, and also for the election in November. It has been alleged that senator Kennedy decided to endorse Obama after President Bill Clinton played the racist card and tried to present

¹⁷Morten Fyhn, *Aftenposten*, January 5, 2008, 14

¹⁸*The New York Times*, "A President Like My Father", Jan 27, 2008

Obama like a replica of Jesse Jackson.¹⁹ Kennedy found it essential that Obama should be a candidate for *all* Americans, and not be presented as a solely black candidate. Also the endorsement by Oprah Winfrey might have proved substantial for Obama, because she appeals to a particular segment of Americans, many who probably would not even have voted in the primaries (or in the coming election) if Oprah had not signified the importance of the 2008 election. This also shows how parts of media not before involved in politics could prove significant for the outcome. Obama was a candidate that understood the importance of reaching out to all voters, not only the resourceful and well educated. That is probably one of the reasons he accepted Winfrey's invitation to visit her show. This strategic move was only the beginning of a well-planned and successful campaign.

The Democratic primaries were not decided until June 3rd. This signaled certain ambivalence among the voters, and it also indicated that it would be difficult to see which way the public eventually was moving. But many voters were skeptical towards the young, black senator, not only because of his skin color and his name, but also because of his lack of both domestic and international experience. During the primaries Obama had a hard time convincing voters that he was not a Muslim,²⁰ and he also faced unexpected opposition when it was revealed that this pastor, Jeremiah Wright from Chicago blamed the United States for the terrorist attacks on September 11, which did not exactly enhance Obama's chances.²¹ These circumstances could easily have cost him both the nomination and the victory, and the fact that they did not, emphasize the extraordinary aspects of the 2008 election.

Barack Obama chose senator Joseph Biden of Delaware as his running mate. This was partly done to fill in for Obama's lack of experience in foreign politics. Apart from that, Biden was regarded a politician with a guy-next-door charm that was supposed to appeal to the blue-collar workers, from whom Obama seemed to lack essential support.²²

The Republican Primaries: Looking for a New Reagan

The Republican dilemma was not lack of candidates but rather the painful knowledge that none of them had what it would take to win the presidential race in November 2008. There was no evident major front-runner, like Hilary Clinton in the Democratic Party. The Republican Party was desperately looking for a new Ronald Reagan to bring back the

¹⁹Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 173

²⁰John Hultgren, *Aftenposten*, April 23, 2008, 14–15

²¹Per Egil Hegge, *Aftenposten*, 27, 2008, 3

²²*Newsweek*, Nov 17, 2008, 88

party's glorious days and invoke the necessary enthusiasm among the electorate. It was difficult to discover that this election would bring back a new "morning in America".²³ The main task was to find an appropriate candidate that would attract conservatives as well as independent voters. Many of the latter had voted Democratic in the 2006 midterm election, something that must have made the Republicans aware of the increasing movement within the electorate. A movement that might indicate the coming of a critical election. The religious right, who became fully incorporated in the party during the first term of George Bush, was a significant part of the Republican electorate and it was of utter importance not to disregard their influence.²⁴ It appeared more or less impossible to join the moderate independents and the Christian right in one candidate.

The Republicans had several candidates in the primaries, but after Super Tuesday, February 5th it was evident that senator John McCain from Arizona had gained an initial advantage over his strongest opponents, Mike Huckabee, Mormon and former governor of Massachusetts, and Mike Romney, former governor of Arkansas. Eventually he became his party's candidate. It had been a troublesome primary season for the aged senator, whose announcement of his candidacy in April of 2007 invoked no particular enthusiasm among Republicans.²⁵ McCain, an experienced politician and a war hero, was a candidate many Republicans could accept, though both sides accused him for lacking the appropriate values. The right wing found him too liberal on both social and immigration issues and the more moderate Republicans regarded him as too conservative and close to Bush while others found him too much a part of the establishment in Washington DC, something that did not act to his advantage, even within his own party. A general fatigue was preading in the Grand Old Party, accompanied by a growing consciousness that they had no visionary leaders who were able to invoke enthusiasm and hope. Within the Republican Party many members were painfully aware that the neo-conservative ideology of the Bush era had frightened many potential voters.²⁶ McCain's background as war prisoner in Vietnam was an experience highly appreciated by the Republican voter segment and was expected to draw a lot of voters. But McCain was also known for his bad temper and lack of leadership ability within his own party. After having accepted his party's nomination at the Republican Convention McCain introduced his running mate, governor Sarah Palin from Alaska. It had been expected that McCain would chose Joseph Lieberman, and Palin was never on his first list of potential candidates, but the McCain campaign was worried

²³Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 227–229

²⁴ibid, 231

²⁵ibid, 245

²⁶ibid, 233

about Obama's support among women and realized that they needed to do something about it.²⁷ McCain also decided that he would not let Obama be the only one making history in this election.²⁸ This approach shows that even the McCain campaign recognized the special importance of this election and acknowledged the fact that it might open up for unlikely candidates. Sarah Palin did in fact appear to brush up McCain's candidacy in the beginning. After having delivered her speech at the Republican Convention she was cheered as the new star of the GOP. Sarah Palin seemed to be what the McCain needed to attract both younger voters and women in general. Conservatives hoped to see the new Reagan in a woman governor from Alaska. With her traditional small town values, the mother of five from Wasilia, Alaska was pro-life, a strong supporter of the right to bear weapon and in favor of limited government. The Republicans hoped that she would appeal to voters not attracted by McCain's candidacy. She appeared to be the Obama of the conservatives, young, charismatic and eloquent. The choice of Sarah Palin indicates that the 2008 election included aspects not presented earlier, like a very conservative Republican woman on the ticket. But unlikely candidates are no criterion for a critical election.

The differences between Obama and McCain seemed insurmountable in many ways, not only the fact that never before had there been such an age difference between two candidates, and the same difference was observed in their way of thinking.²⁹ They seemed to disagree on a lot of issues, like health care, abortion, tax cuts and the war in Iraq.³⁰ Obama represented a new generation and a new era, and a hope for change that would hopefully lead to a movement within the electorate, an ingredient important in critical elections, because it might lead to new power structures. Obama seemed to capture the worries of the American public, but he also inspired hope for the future during his primary campaign. The generational aspect often explains the 25–40 year cycle between critical elections, and it was now exactly 40 years since 1968, and 28 years since the 1980 elections, if these elections should be categorized as critical.

Obama was surely a candidate tailor-made for a very special and important election, but the main question was his electability. But the McCain/Palin ticket also indicated that if elected a woman might theoretically become president. As Vice President she would be just a heartbeat away from the Presidency. The fact that neither gender nor race, or even inexperience was important factors does not necessarily depict that a critical

²⁷Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 328

²⁸Halvor Elvik, *Dagbladet*, September 7, 2008, 3

²⁹Halvor Elvik, *Dagbladet*, June 5th, 2008, 18

³⁰John Hultgren, *Aftenposten*, June 5th, 2008, 16

election was on its way, it might also indicate that America had moved on and was open to untraditional candidates. If a young, black, liberal, rather unknown senator could be nominated as his party's candidate for the presidential election was in itself a strong indication of a distinct pendulum swing, but it could also prove to be a unique possibility to make history. This could also be said about Palin, a rather unknown Alaskan governor, who liked to see herself as a hockey mom. Historical, and extraordinary, but not necessarily an indication of an approaching critical election, though the primaries showed several relevant elements, like Key's "voter concern" and "electoral involvement". But the public's engagement in the primaries might also be the result of the unlikely candidates of this election. This thesis asserts that Sarah Palin and Barack Obama are definitely more attractive to voters' attention than for example George Bush and John Kerry.

It's Been A Long Time Coming: The Historical Tuesday

On November 4, 2008 at 11.00 EST Senator Barack Hussein Obama jr. was elected 44th president of the United States. He was the first Afro-American ever to be elected to the highest office in the nation, but this was not the only extra-ordinary aspect of the 2008 election. The young senator from the state of Illinois was the first senator since John F. Kennedy to win the presidential election and Obama was also the first Democrat to win more than 51% of the popular votes, the last candidate to do so being Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964.³¹ But neither the 1960 nor the 1964 election were characterized as critical. Obama also carried previously Republican states such as Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana, New Mexico and Florida. Virginia and Indiana had not gone Democratic since 1964. The 1964 election is not comparable to the 2008 election when it comes to criticality, however many voters saw Johnson as the heir of John F. Kennedy's politics and wanted to confirm their beliefs in Kennedy's heritage.

In the 2006 midterm election the Democrats had gained majority in both the House of Representatives and in the Senate. They had also secured seven seats in the Senate, up to altogether 51 seats, and in the House of Representatives they were up from 201 to 233 seats. Also six governorships changed from GOP to Democrats.³² All this indicated a certain movement within the electorate, but probably not enough to indicate a coming of a critical election two years later. The 2008 election saw a further Democratic increase in both House and Senate. The Democrats gained 3 seats in the Senate and 22 seats in

³¹ *USA Today*, Nov 5, 2008, p 2A

³² www.cnn.com/election/2006/

the House.³³

When it comes to John McCain he fought a hopeless battle, due to his alleged support for George W. Bush during both his terms. Some analysts claim that his choice of running mate, governor Sarah Palin of Alaska might have spoiled his chances considerably, since she proved more and more controversial as the campaign moved on. Apart from that, Palin was apparently picked in order to appeal to the Christian Right of the Republican voter segment, but then again she probably kept both women and/or moderate Republicans away from voting Republican. The independent votes McCain had hoped to reach saw Sarah Palin as a good reason to vote for Obama/Biden.³⁴ In addition she had even been an embarrassment to the McCain campaign with her comments on everything from Russia and foreign policy to putting herself and her candidacy in a central position.³⁵

When the presidential campaign started, after the party conventions in August/September, Barack Obama and John McCain were rated equally in the polls. It seemed as if the two candidates still had no particular issue going for them that could make one or the other take a clear lead. There was an undeniable polarization within the American society, a considerable amount of voter concern, blended with an eagerness to see the incumbent president leave office, but this concern appeared most of all to have a strong ideological side. Undoubtedly, the winner would have to deal with two wars, a growing recession, terror threats and increasing unemployment. The war in Iraq was certainly an issue, but in general, people seemed a bit fatigued by war and the debates on the justification of the invasion, a theme that had been heavily debated between Bush and Kerry during the 2004 election campaign. But on September 14th the Lehman Brothers went bankrupt, plunging the country into its worst financial crisis since the Depression of the 1930s. McCain then made his unforgettable statement, which he definitely has regretted ever since: “The fundamentals of the American economy are strong”,³⁶ and thereby he unintentionally parked himself on the sideline, revealing a total lack of insight into what was going on in the American economy. When McCain postponed his campaign to go back to Washington D.C. to deal with the financial crisis he only dug the hole deeper for himself, and people began to question his judgment. It has been argued that Obama won the election because of the financial crisis, but it is more precise to claim that he won because of how he dealt with the crisis in his election campaign, namely in a cool,

³³www.npr.org/news/specials/election2008/2008-election-map.htm/#/president

³⁴Charles M. Madigan, *Destiny Calling: How the People Elected Barack Obama*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 2009), 186

³⁵ibid, 146

³⁶John McCain speaking on Sept 15, just hours before the Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy.

analytical and measured way.³⁷ This was the first time since 1932 that a severe financial crisis came to dominate the election, and how to deal with the troublesome economy eventually became *the* issue of the 2008 election. In a critical election specific issues might trigger engagement and energy among voters and pave way for new coalitions, and disintegrate old ones. The 1932 election gave way to new voting coalitions and so did the 1968 election, with the latter terminating the coalitions established in 1932. It seems like the voters believed in Obama's *Change We Can Believe In*, and that his suggestions on how to deal with the crisis seemed plausible to the American public. But the historical fact that a black man had been elected to the presidency overshadowed the issues of the election, and part of his success is undoubtedly attributed to his well-planned campaign.

The Perfect Campaign: Obama, Axelrod and the New Media

Obama led a flawless campaign, sticking to substances and making up for his lack of experience with a presidential approach and a statesman's image. He had picked his advisers carefully, and especially David Axelrod had an enormous influence on how his campaign was to be carried out. Axelrod also acted as a political adviser to Barack Obama in his campaign for the US Senate in 2004. He took control of the campaign at an early stage and released a five-minute video on Jan 16, 2007. Axelrod was aware of the compelling necessity to involve ordinary people in the campaign. The deliberate appliance of new media was a conscious tool in reaching out to new voting groups and thereby creating new coalitions, elements important in critical elections. The Internet was also used to raise money for the campaign, and it became the most important arena for small donations from ordinary people.³⁸ The contributions from ordinary people might also have had a psychological effect since it appeared to give the contributors a sense of "ownership" to the candidate.

The use of the Internet did change the way American presidential campaigns used to be carried out. On November 4, the day of the election, *The New York Times* wrote on its front page: "The '08 Campaign: A Sea Change for Politics as We Know It", focusing on the importance of new media in the race for the presidency. It also emphasized how cell phones were used extensively to reach voters. Especially the Democrats were credited

³⁷Joe Klein, "Passing the Torch", *Time Magazine Commemorative Issue*, Nov 2008, 27

³⁸William E. Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril. Eight Challenges to America's Future*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 180–182

for their extensive and smart application of the Internet and text messages. At an early stage they understood that this was the only way to reach young voters who do not normally get their information from newspapers or television. The Democrats' expansion into states like Virginia, North Carolina and Indiana might have been achieved due to heavy use of the Internet, and text messages. These are states that are not normally exposed to Democratic values and beliefs.³⁹ The Obama campaign's deliberate efforts into previously Republican states might be attributed to former Chairman of the Democratic Party Howard Dean. He launched a so-called "50-state strategy" in his effort to be nominated in 2004, and decided not to focus only in traditional Democratic territory.⁴⁰ Mr. Dean was also a pioneer when it came to use of the Internet in his 2004 presidential campaign. This new application of technological media might have created new voting groups by engaging segments of the public not otherwise engaged in presidential elections. Obama's new way of campaigning and its contribution to his victory are further explored in chapter four.

The financial crisis released rather polarized debates among the candidates on how to deal with the challenges when elected. The voters seemed to approve Obama's suggestions on how to deal with the crisis, though he was heavily accused from the political right for being a socialist and even a communist. But Obama never fell for the attempt to strike back in an emotional way when McCain/Palin tried to make him appear like a socialist who wanted to "spread the wealth around".⁴¹ Obama stuck to his narrative for the entire campaign, while McCain tried to change *his* several times. First he focused on experience, and then he started talking about change, trying to present himself as a maverick. But senator McCain nevertheless became associated with the Washington D.C. establishment, and the Democrats succeeded in connecting him closely to Bush by stating that "...McCain voted with George Bush 90% of the time".⁴² Being connected to Bush did not exactly promote his campaign. Obama and Axelrod's recipe proved successful also in connection with how to deal with the financial crisis.

Obama's color blind campaign was deliberate, his message was to include *all* Americans, regardless of color, gender and social standing. In this way he also evoked associations to his 2004 Convention speech, calling for a *United* States of America. Perhaps a necessary reminder for all Americans considered the growing polarization and the lack

³⁹ *The New York Times*, "The '08 Campaign: A Sea of Change for politics as We Know It", Nov 4, 2008, P1 & P20

⁴⁰ topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/howard_dean/index.html

⁴¹ Expression applied by Barack Obama in a reply to the so-called Plumber Joe, the expression was later picked up by the McCain campaign to prove that Obama was a socialist.

⁴² Barack Obama, Thursday August 28th at the Democratic National Convention

of unity among Americans that the last years of the Bush administration displayed. The messages *Yes, We Can*, and *Change We Can Believe in* soon became affirmative statements that signaled a new and positive start for America. The successful and well-directed campaign might have constituted a considerable part of his victory. In addition to Obama's charismatic performances it proved to be the perfect combination.

The torch had definitely been passed again, but this Kennedy metaphor was not in itself an indication of a critical election as it had not been in 1960 either. In the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency, a generation born and raised in the 20th century saw the emergence of generational change of the early sixties. Like Obama, Kennedy was a charismatic candidate with a certain star image that proved successful. They were both young senators that inspired and engaged the public. *Yes We Can* was Obama's *New Frontier*, a message that focused on a better future for the United States.

When the president elect emerged on the scene in Grant Park, Illinois at midnight Nov 4, with his family, not only Americans were aware of that historical and also extremely emotional moment. All over the country spontaneous celebrations broke out after the result was confirmed, expressing both relief and great expectations. Also John McCain referred to the historical aspect of this election in his concession speech from the Arizona Biltmore, emphasizing its significance for Afro-Americans, and what the election of Obama means to previous intolerance and discrimination.⁴³ There was certainly also a generational change in the 2008 election; a distinctive hope for a new beginning was prevalent throughout the public. A black man in the White House is not necessarily a distinct evidence of a critical election. Breaking the racial barrier is only crucial if the other criteria are present as well. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency is unique in many ways, but to fully understand its implications, not only criteria for critical elections must be explored but also voting patterns and the political polarization of 21st century America. To be able to determine the criticality of the 2008 election it is imperative to also study changes in the voting patterns in the 1968 election and the 1980 election. There is no doubt that the American society was distinctively polarized when the primaries started in 2008, but whether political polarization might be an indication of a coming critical election depends on several factors. Voting patterns and their impact on an eventual new cleavage within the electorate have to be analyzed in order to make such a conclusion.

⁴³*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P1

The Political Polarization of the 21st Century

We might define American political polarization as the growing ideological divide between the two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. A division between the two opposite parties is both assumed and welcomed, otherwise it would be impossible or very difficult for voters to make a reasonable choice. A certain polarization is a significant characteristic of a thriving democracy, but an ever-expanding and almost hostile polarization, placing the core of the parties on their extreme sides will most probably lead to an inevitable lack of cooperation both on the federal and the state level, and eventually cause stalemate and frustration. The ideological polarization between the parties is seen first and foremost through the voting in Congress, and today's almost unobtainable bipartisanship and lack of cooperation is the result of a negative process that started 30–40 years ago. The golden years for Congressional bipartisanship were the post War era up to the recession in the late 1970s. This period is also called the Great Compression, a result of the prosperous economy and the rather insignificant imbalance between rich and poor, compared to today's standard.⁴⁴

In the beginning of the 1960s the ideological division between the parties was less distinct than it is today, and both the Republican and the Democratic Party were defined as so-called “umbrella parties”.⁴⁵ The idea behind this approach goes back to the 19th century and implies that both parties were supposed to cover a whole range of ideas and values, including for example both conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans within their respective parties. Within the Republican Party one could find politicians defined as “Wall Street Republican”, as opposed to “Main Street Republicans”. Wall Street Republicans were often fiscally conservative, but socially liberal.⁴⁶ President Gerald Ford, and also Vice President Nelson Rockefeller might be placed in this category. Main Street Republicans were both culturally and fiscally conservative and appealed to basic and traditional American values. A move towards a more conservative social agenda took place during the Reagan presidency, which eventually saw the demise of the Wall Street Republican when Reagan joined hands with the Religious Right and paved the way for a new party ideology. Another category was Southern Democrats who after 1968 usually voted Republican in presidential elections and Democratic in general elections. The 1968 election serves as a starting point for the development of political polarization. Paulson

⁴⁴Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State. Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 123

⁴⁵Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 87

⁴⁶ibid, 75–76

claims that the most important polarization was the one that developed within the parties, because this process was an important contributor to defining 1968 as a critical election.⁴⁷ A polarization within the parties is likely to move voters from one party to the other, thereby causing a distinct move in the electorate and the establishment of new voting coalitions and new party structures.

Today the umbrella definition has vanished; Democrats have in general become more liberal and Republicans more conservative. On this background, the supporters of both parties seem to estimate each other less than before.⁴⁸ But even if Congress and politicians in general seem more polarized today the voters do not follow this trend blindly. Both scholars and polls point towards the fact that most Americans tend to move towards the center when it comes to beliefs and values.⁴⁹ This might also explain the decline of partisan loyalty, not because parties are not as important as earlier, but because the two major parties tend to move to the right or to the left, omitting all those Americans who prefer to identify themselves politically with the center. There appears to be a divergence between politicians and their voters when it comes to polarization. This might open up for eventual third parties or independents, which might appeal to the large segment of moderate voters of both parties.

An interesting question is whether such an enlarged polarization might lead to a renewed partisan identification, so that this important traditional criterion for critical elections might be applicable again. As pointed out in the first section of this chapter, the 2000 election was not particularly characterized by ideological polarization between the candidates, but the agonizing struggle for the presidency that followed the election did increase suspicion and polarization.⁵⁰ This trend was deepened and expressed in the years following the September 11 attacks and through the 2004 presidential campaign, where the growing anti-Bush movement became part of the public voice. Though the Republican Party strengthened its position considerably in this election Americans were more polarized than ever before, and the whole specter of issues was represented in this cleavage, from foreign policy to traditional values.⁵¹ In the context of critical elections a growing polarization within the electorate might be a signal of an increasing voter concern, but it might also turn out to be a manifestation of already established

⁴⁷Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 87–88

⁴⁸Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State. Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 112

⁴⁹*ibid*, 136

⁵⁰*ibid*, x-preface

⁵¹Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 361

differences. There was a definite polarization within the electorate in the 2004 election, divided approximately 50–50, with strong and emotional engagement on both sides, but this election turned out to be maintaining, not critical. Voters more or less confirmed their party loyalty and become more Republican or respectively more Democratic, and the election produced no particular new cleavage within the electorate. The polarization took place only between and not within the respective parties. The different level of polarization displayed by the 2004 election in comparison to the 2000 election is shown by the increase in voter turnout in the so-called swing states, like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida.⁵²

Gradually, strong anti-Bush sentiments spread through the American public during his last term, and eventually led to polarization also within the Republican Party. The many crucial issues that emerged on the political arena in the United States in the wake of the September 11 attacks engaged the public to a considerable degree. Expressions of doubt when it came to the justification of the two wars seemed to divide the American public and made one segment of the Americans suspicious and even hostile to the other. This distinction became especially evident prior to the invasion of Iraq. Eventually, many Americans proved to be negative to the exaggerated use of neo-conservative rhetoric, and began to question the success of the war on terrorism. Bush' extremely low approval rating when the 2008 primaries started could be interpreted as a sign of a beginning movement within the electorate. As a comparison, President Jimmy Carter saw an approval rating of 34% at the end of his term, and President Johnson was down to 49% in 1968. Usually most presidents are above 50% at this point in office.⁵³ This ideological polarization that emerged within the incumbent's party emphasized the importance of the 2008 election and led to speculations of whether this election would see a considerable change in voting behavior. Polarization might be a contributing factor to a critical election, but only if it causes a distinct movement of voters from one party to the other. An exploration of American voting behavior is essential in understanding how voters might change their preferences in times of great challenges, and how this might alter the electorate map and create new political coalitions.

⁵²Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 357

⁵³uspolitics.about.com/od/polls/1/bl_historical_approval.htm

Voting behavior and Voting Coalitions

An analysis of the most important elements in voting behavior and how it eventually might change the political structure is essential in the interpretation of critical elections. How and why people vote the way they do have always been of crucial interest to American scholars involved in interpreting the criticality of elections. We know from the first chapter that there are certain criteria to be met in critical elections, and those criteria often materialize due to changes in established voting patterns.

When it comes to voting behavior there appears to be both a psychological and a sociological approach.⁵⁴ Analysts often presume that there is a connection between those two factors, and that the socio-economic background of voters gives an indication of their psychological approach as well. The sociological aspect deals with elements like social class, income, demography, gender, race and occupation, and often also religion and ethnic background.⁵⁵ The psychological side of voting behavior tries to go behind the socioeconomic characteristics and figure out how the voters actually view the candidates and their issues. Political scientists often have an opinion of how these groups intertwine and influence the voting outcome. Certain connections between these groups might also contribute to critical elections, especially when expected voting behavior does not occur. We know that rich people vote more than poor and that middle-aged Americans vote more often than the young or the old, or that Afro-Americans tend to vote less than white people.⁵⁶ We also assume that white, Protestant middle and upper class men vote Republican to a considerable degree, while blue collar Catholics, women, young people and academia often tend to support the Democrats. People with strong partisan loyalty seem to vote more than those who tend to characterize themselves as independents.⁵⁷ In most elections the typical patterns are sustained, and voters more or less follow their traditional ways of voting. But it is a sad fact that only approximately 50% of the population eligible to vote does actually use their right to vote in presidential elections.⁵⁸ Both the 2000 and the 2004 elections confirmed the socio-economic and the psychological approach to voting, and no new voting groups seems to have emerged.

A closer look at electoral maps from 1944 to 2004 reveals that there is also geographical pattern.⁵⁹ The electoral map of the 1968 election signifies distinct changes compared to

⁵⁴Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 337–338

⁵⁵ibid, 338–340

⁵⁶ibid, 332, 334

⁵⁷ibid, 334

⁵⁸ibid, inside front cover

⁵⁹ibid, inside front and back cover

the 1964 election. The Red and the Blue states almost traded places, and the third candidate, George Wallace who ran as Independent, carried several states in the South and won 45 of the electoral votes.⁶⁰ The rise of a third party or a strong independent candidate might be an indication of a coming critical election as it signals the decline of party loyalty and the movement of the electorate in new directions. The election of Nixon in 1968 saw the demise of the New Deal coalition, when new groups formed a new coalition that ensured Nixon the victory. Roosevelt's New Deal voting coalition is probably one of the most well known of such coalitions in American political history, comprising the urban North, the South, minority groups and blue-collar workers. This coalition established the Democratic majority that lasted until 1968, though Lawrence claims that this coalition started its decline in the 1950s when the economy prospered and people were no longer so dependent on the Democratic Party for their standard of living.⁶¹ The new Republican coalition, which was the result of the particular voting patterns of the 1968 election, included parts of the South, most of the Midwest and the West, white people, Protestants, white-collar workers and businessmen.⁶² After 1968 the South voted Republican in presidential elections. So did mainly the Midwest and the Southwest, while the Northeast and the West coast usually went Democratic. Critical elections might see a change in this pattern as such elections often change the electoral map considerably. When it comes to established geographical patterns, voters on the West and East Coast of the United States are allegedly more liberal than the South and the Midwest.

1968 was a turbulent year not only in America and the hippie movement and the counter culture of 1966–67 indicated a coming change in American social and political culture. The United States experienced two assassinations in the first half of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., in April and in June; senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated after having given his victory speech in connection with the California primary. These tragic circumstances might have influenced the voting behavior, as many Americans were disillusioned at this point. This new group of voters comprised people from both parties that opposed Johnson's Great Society, the way the war in Vietnam was conducted and they also expressed a certain opposition to the consequences of Civil Rights Movement. Many of these voters were traditionally Democrats, but felt betrayed by their own party,

⁶⁰Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 332

⁶¹David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 172–173

⁶²Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 345

and voted for Nixon even though they continued to regard themselves as Democrats.

The South continued to vote Democratic in general elections. This is not so sensational, considering the fact that in many of the presidential elections to come, most Americans would still identify themselves as Democrats. In the 1968 election 46% regarded themselves as Democrats, while only 27% said that they identified themselves with the Republicans. In 2004 the numbers were respectively 33% and 29%.⁶³ Numbers from the 1968 election indicates that there was still a certain party loyalty among Democrats when asked in the polls, but that the polarization within the Democratic Party led to an altered voting behavior that became visible in the electoral map.

The 1980 election displays the most sensational divergence in voting behavior since 1932 when it comes to gender. More than 15% more men than women voted for Reagan, and he also attracted young voters despite of his age.⁶⁴ As mentioned earlier, Reagan also won a lot of Democratic voters, the so-called Reagan Democrats. In the 1980 election 47% of the voters still identified themselves as Democrats, and only 23% as Republicans. Ronald Reagan seemed to have got heavy support from Democrats and Independents.⁶⁵ The 1980 election is an election in which voters did not stick to the traditional voting patterns and thereby established new coalitions. A deeper analysis of both the 1968 and the 1980 elections are presented in chapter three.

This brief analysis indicates that voting behavior might lead to the establishment of new voting coalitions based on other factors than party loyalty. A certain voter concern might move the voters in unexpected directions and challenge the established conceptualization of coalitions. Pendulum swings in the electorate often leads to an altered voting behavior. There is not doubt that the two Bush periods are significant in the growing voter concern that became visible during the last two-three years of his second term. According to V. O. Key increased voter concern and a movement within the electorate are important issues in a critical election and the presentation of the 2008 presidential election shows that these issues were present to a certain extent. But the 2008 election included many other spectacular aspects that made this election extraordinary, like an Afro-American candidate and his successful and creative way of campaigning. These factors are dealt with in chapter four. Prior to this, it is crucial to explore both the 1968 and the 1980 election to find out whether these any of these elections qualify as critical.

⁶³Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 341

⁶⁴ibid, 340–341

⁶⁵ibid, 341

Chapter 3

The 1968 and the 1980 Elections

This chapter discusses and compares the 1968 and the 1980 elections against the background of V. O. Key's definitions of critical election as presented in chapter one. The divergence between scholars on the criticality of these elections indicates that the two elections probably might not include all the required elements compatible with the traditional criteria for critical elections. The focus in this chapter is mainly on the 1968 election as this thesis regards this election as the more significant of the two in this context. This is because the 1968 election seems to fulfill the required criteria to a further extent than the 1980 election. These two elections are also compared to three previous elections, all defined as critical, namely 1860, 1896 and 1932. This chapter also explores why not all the traditional criteria might be applicable to post World War II elections and tries to discover possible new criteria.

The 2008 election is not included in the comparisons between the 1968 and the 1980 elections in this chapter since the findings here are applied to the analysis of the 2008 election in chapter four. The two above mentioned elections are chosen as comparisons because they seemed to have aroused interest and enthusiasm among scholars dedicated to the exploration of critical elections, and also since they are the two post-war elections which have moved the electorate considerably and created new political structures.

Arthur Paulson is an important scholar when it comes to analyzing post-war elections, and in addition to voter concern he also mentions "generational change", as an important aspect of critical elections.¹ As mentioned in chapter one, Paulson's main contribution to the discussion of the criticality of the 1968 election is that "dealignment should be understood as realignment by other means".² This is the essence of his exploration of the

¹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 3

²ibid, 1

changes in voting behavior that emerged in the late 1960s; the decline of the old partisan loyalty will result in a new party system, still capable of producing critical elections. David Lawrence recognizes that there were several indications of an approaching critical election in the late 1960s, but he concludes that due to a weak Republican Party loyalty this did not occur.³ This shows that he does not approve of Paulson's dealignment approach. When it comes to Reagan's victory in 1980 he attributes this to the failures of Jimmy Carter.⁴ Also scholars like Burnham and Mayhew are relevant in this context.

Johnson and Carter: The Challenges of the Election Year

To fully understand the implications of both the 1968 and the 1980 primaries and elections it is crucial to take a closer look at the politics of the administrations and also the numerous events that shook the American society in both the election years. Johnson's landslide victory in 1964 was regarded as the manifestation of his ability and merit to be president in his own right. Johnson got 61% of the popular vote, an achievement that was regarded as a mandate to carry out his agenda.⁵ His victory might also be defined as a confirmation and justification of the relevance of American liberalism, an ideological direction in American politics first established and developed in the F. D. Roosevelt years. American liberalism emphasized personal freedom, individual rights and property rights. Government activism was regarded as the appropriate tool to secure and promote this freedom and was the prevalent ideology among American voters in 1964. The Republican alternative, represented by Barry Goldwater's candidacy, suffered a catastrophic defeat, with a total of only 52 electoral votes in 1964.⁶

Johnson had huge ambitions for himself and his country and went to work enthusiastically. Johnson's ambitions also included the less fortunate in the United States and he launched his Great Society with new perspectives for millions of poor Americans. Johnson, who was an energetic and determined president undoubtedly achieved a lot, both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were passed during his time in office. But Johnson had inherited the conflict in South East Asia from Kennedy, but the promise not to extend the war and at the same time keep the communists out of South Vietnam

³David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 11–12

⁴ibid, 112–113

⁵Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 44

⁶Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 409

was to prove impossible.⁷ The atmosphere in the United States in the late 1960s was marked by an increasing frustration and impatience, due to the economical and social challenges of the Great Society and the war in Vietnam. Both issues eventually polarized the American public considerably.

When Carter was elected president in 1976 he carried 50.1% of the popular vote against the incumbent Gerald Ford.⁸ He carried 297 electoral votes, which was not exactly a landslide. It has been alleged that Carter's victory was a reaction to Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate affair. Carter might also be regarded as the voters' rejection of the establishment in Washington DC. The Georgian governor was considered a "Mr. Clean", a label that might have been to his advantage in the beginning of his presidency but soon proved inadequate as Carter lacked both federal and international experience. Carter started out with great ambitions both at home and abroad and had success with his peace negotiations in the Middle East when peace was established between Israel and Egypt. But the revolution in Iran in the beginning of 1979 had serious consequences for oil supplies to the United States and Americans suddenly found themselves with high gas prices and long lines at gas stations. When Carter also included the term "crisis of confidence" in a televised speech, he clearly added a dimension to the general national depression.⁹

The year 1968 started dramatically, with the Tet offensive in Vietnam. This action from the Vietnamese was an eye-opener to many Americans about how the war was in fact conducted, and that victory was far from obtained. Until 1968 most Americans seemed to have been in favor of the war,¹⁰ but as the war accelerated many people came to question the nation's presence in the South Asian country, and demanded an end to the war. The demonstrations against the war ran parallel to riots and looting in several big cities, especially by frustrated Afro-Americans who felt their needs were being neglected in spite of the numerous welfare programs initiated by the Great Society. Voter concern, an important criterion in critical elections, had become overwhelming when President Johnson in April 1968 decided to withdraw from the presidential race.

It might be argued that president Jimmy Carter had a similar experience in the election year 1980. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, and Carter's response manifested itself in extensive economic sanctions and the unpopular

⁷Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism. A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Boston & New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2007), 141

⁸Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 468

⁹ibid, 468-469

¹⁰Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism. A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Boston & New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2007), 135

decision not to participate in the summer Olympics in Moscow. Neither had any particular effects. Jimmy Carter's "Vietnam" was the Iranian hostage crisis that came to mark a whole year before the presidential election in 1980. Trying to resolve this extremely tragic event took much of Carter's energy and time and it also affected the general atmosphere in the American public. The realization that the most powerful nation on earth was unable to release its citizens from captivity in a foreign country added to the growing feeling of powerlessness. The positive approach to life and the belief that any problem has a solution, a trait that characterizes the American civic creed, had been substituted with a mood of national depression and fatigue.¹¹ But contrary to Johnson, Carter did not consider withdrawing from the presidential race. Both presidents faced economic problems and a coming recession and came to experience tough and turbulent times as their eventual re-election approached. Both experienced an anxious and also rather angry public and a growing voter concern in the months prior to the elections and for both incumbents this included several elements present in emerging critical elections. This was soon to be manifested through turbulent primaries.

The Primaries: Challenges and Important Decisions

Johnson's decision to provide both what he called "guns and butter" was an exaggerated and far too ambitious agenda and was to become his end. The American economy could not sustain both the expensive government programs and the expanding war in Vietnam without increased taxation, something Johnson was more or less forced to do in 1967.¹² But the tax law was a measure that came too late and could not stop the rising inflation. Johnson presumed that people both should and would look to the government for their well being and regarded liberalism as the perfect tool for achieving his ambitions on their behalf.¹³ In the late 1960s the US economy had been passed by both the Japanese and the European Economic Community as the world's fastest growing economies.¹⁴ The American middle class had expanded greatly during the 1950s and the 1960s and obtained a standard of living most western countries envied. Suddenly they saw their life-style endangered, and eventually became reluctant to see their tax money paying for government programs they felt they did not benefit from.¹⁵ Together with the fiscal crisis

¹¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 469

¹²Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism. A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Boston & New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2007), 168–170

¹³ibid, 175

¹⁴ibid, 172

¹⁵ibid, 172

the war in Vietnam became the last straw that broke the camel's back. Carter also faced stagflation and unemployment and he obviously lacked the energy to do something about it. Like Johnson he wanted to provide both guns and butter. Both presidents were hit by a certain fatigue and overwhelmed by the enormous problems the nation was facing.

During 1968 riots and demonstrations against the war that had started on university campuses spread to poor, white neighborhoods that also felt left out by Johnson's Great Society. This situation reflected the general feeling of resignation permeating the American society. Several groups took the opportunity to participate in violent demonstrations to express their anger and frustration and their feelings of being neglected. "The undeserving poor" became a frequently used expression and comprised much of the frustration of the working middle- and lower classes. Their previously strong Democratic identification began to wane, something that the Republican Party began to take advantage of.¹⁶ In addition civil rights demonstrations more or less got out of control, especially after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. African-American ghettos saw the explosion of numerous riots and looting, and the non-violent approach of Dr. King gave way to violence and killings. In Washington D.C. Johnson had to call in the federal troops but they did not manage to pacify the situation.¹⁷ The author's conclusion is that the unrest did actually put the focus on the conditions of these areas of the cities where the poor Afro-Americans lived, but it also made white people hostile to the demands of the Afro-Americans, establishing a backlash against the civil rights movement and anger towards the Democratic Party.

With president Johnson out of the primaries the scenario opened up for several other Democratic candidates, the first being senator Eugene McCarthy whose primary agenda was to end the war in Vietnam as soon as possible. When senator Robert Kennedy entered the race he came forward as the nation's conscience, focusing on the growing problems in the cities and the racial aspects of poverty.¹⁸ An assassin's violence on June 5, 1968 put an end to Kennedy's aspirations when a bullet killed him after he won the California primary. Eventually, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was nominated the Democratic Party's candidate for the election. The Convention in Chicago was influenced by the violent war demonstrations and battles between "yippies" and city police that were raging outside the building, a reflection of the drama and controversies that had affected the presidential race so far. The nation was in a state of turmoil and frustration, signaling the challenges the next president would have to face. The many candidates in the Democratic primary

¹⁶Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 174

¹⁷ibid, 425-426

¹⁸ibid, 423

indicated the ambivalence of the voters, and the growing indecisiveness and frustration about which way the party and also the country were heading. This is definitely an aspect that could point towards a coming critical election.¹⁹ The different candidates represented different views on both the war and the government spending, and thereby split Democratic voters. The Republican primaries in 1968 ran much smoother and Richard Nixon won an easy nomination, soon leaving his two challengers Ronald Reagan and Nelson Rockefeller to realize that the game was over.²⁰

The 1980 primaries were not as dramatic and frustrating, but for the Democratic Party the lack of loyalty for the incumbent was clearly displayed when senator Edward Kennedy decided to challenge Carter for their party's nomination. But Kennedy was still too closely associated with the Chappaquiddick accident and this tragic event contributed to questions about Kennedy's ability to handle crises.²¹ A reluctance to identify with the incumbent president seems to be common for the elections of 1968 and 1980. A certain smoothness characterized the 1980 Republican nomination, when the man they all instinctively had been waiting for entered the race. Ronald Reagan had been campaigning for years and this was finally his time.

A dramatic primary season and an incumbent who withdrew from the presidential race in the 1968 election and an almost helpless and paralyzed incumbent in the 1980 election are not necessarily clear indications of a coming critical election, but these circumstances surely signify that the elections would be characterized as extraordinary. A critical election is always a reflection of politics and solutions prior to that particular election and cannot be regarded as a turbulent and an isolated phenomenon. Both primaries indicated that voters were more than commonly concerned, and demanded abrupt changes. This was soon to be displayed in the electoral map.

The 1968 Election: A Farewell to the New Deal

In spite of enormous voter concern and a dramatic election year, Richard Nixon's victory on November 6, 1968 was not a landslide. The final result was not ready until the day after the election. He did carry 301 electoral votes, compared to Humphrey's 191, but the difference in popular votes was only approximately half a million.²² Voter turnout had been declining since 1960, when the turnout was 63.1% and yet the turnout in this

¹⁹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 10

²⁰Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 106

²¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 471

²²Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 162

election was 60.8%.²³ This would be the last time in the twentieth century that voter turnout would exceed 60%. A look at the electoral map indicates a strong Republican take-over in several states, many blue states replaced by red, in comparison to the 1964 election.²⁴ Nixon repeated 1960's close race; the only difference was that he now was part of the winning team. The most important changes in the 1968 election emerged in the South, which was divided between Nixon and Wallace. The South had been more or less exclusively Democratic since the end of the Civil War. Nixon also carried the interior West and he also managed to split the Northeast. The Democrats did well among their traditionally loyal voters outside the South, like the big cities, among Afro-Americans and also among union members.²⁵

During his campaign Nixon had tried to appeal to what he named "the forgotten Americans", which might best be translated as "ordinary middle class people", in contrast to violent and rioting Afro-Americans and students. Nixon's voters comprised the "Silent Majority", people who worked and paid their taxes, who were devoted patriots and attended church. They were the Americans that would eventually become the base of a new Republican voter segment. In line with this approach, the Nixon campaign also presented commercials emphasizing the increase in crimes and violence in America. When it came to approaching the black community he did not pay them any particular attention, because he feared that endorsing the civil rights movement might cost him the votes of white middle class voters in suburban America.²⁶ This shows that Nixon was well aware of where his voters were.

Humphrey became forever linked to his President, though he tried to promise a solution to the war in Vietnam and the increasing crime rate at home. But he also alienated some of his more liberal supporters, when speaking about police violence.²⁷ Nevertheless, Humphrey became associated with the lawlessness and frustrations expressed not only in Chicago during the convention, but also throughout the campaign months that fall. Considering the multiple problems Humphrey faced both during the primaries and the presidential campaign it is amazing that he came that close to victory, winning 42.7% of the popular vote compared to Nixon's 43.4%.²⁸ This might indicate the reluctance of frustrated Democratic voters to vote Republican, in spite of all the turmoil.

One spectacular aspect of this election is the strong appearance of a third candidate,

²³www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html

²⁴Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside front cover

²⁵ibid, 162

²⁶Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 140

²⁷ibid, 134

²⁸Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 442

George C. Wallace, governor of Alabama. Wallace was the leader of the American Independent Party, a party he had established himself. He received 13.3% of the popular votes, and carried Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas. His party might best be described as a populist movement, strongly in favor of lower taxes, and with a distinct focus on law and order. Wallace and his voters opposed the Northeastern elites, federalism and government programs favoring the poor and the Afro-Americans, or “Negroes” as he called them. Wallace made racism legitimate in the Deep South again though he never said that directly, and he came forth as the voice of the frustrated white lower classes that most of all feared that desegregation would enable the blacks to take their jobs and alter the Southern Way of Life. Wallace represented the white Southerner, who felt that his or her protests against the consequences of the civil rights legislation had not been properly attended to.²⁹ His voters probably used to be a loyal part of the New Deal Coalition and supporters of the Democratic Party. When Johnson signed the Civil Rights Laws and established the Great Society with numerous welfare programs they felt betrayed by their own party and their partisan identification began to wane. But in 1968 they were probably not yet ready to vote Republican in a presidential election. Wallace therefore became their transition, even though he appeared more conservative and populist than the Republican Party they would vote for in years to come after the 1968 election. Wallace himself did not have much sympathy towards neither Democrats nor Republicans, and claimed that both parties had neglected and betrayed the ordinary, honest, hard-working American.³⁰ In this way the success of the American Independent Party signals a critical election, since it seems to have appealed to so many voters on their way from one party to another, and consequently caused the South to undergo the most dramatic shift since the New Deal. Another interesting aspect of Wallace’s participation in the election is his appeal to voters in Florida, usually not a state characterized as the Deep South, though geographically it might be included in the concept. Wallace carried 28.5% of the popular vote in Florida and he also did well in Delaware, with 13.3%.³¹ His success in Florida might be explained by heavy immigration from Cuba. Many Cubans had fled from Cuba after the communist take-over by Fidel Castro in 1959 and were illegal immigrants. This immigration might have contributed to white ethnic support for Wallace.

One of the most dramatic elections in American history had come to an end when Richard Nixon gave his victory speech, but all the controversies around candidates and

²⁹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 433

³⁰Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 138

³¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 422

issues must be explored on the background of the criteria for critical elections to be able to decide on its eventual criticality.

The 1968 Election in the Context of Critical Elections

When trying to determine the criticality of an election one has to bear in mind V. O. Key's three main criteria: extensive voter concern, increased voter participation and a movement within the electorate leading to a distinctive and altered cleavage between the major parties with a new governing majority.

There is no doubt that there was a considerable voter concern prior to the 1968 election; even scholars who do not categorize this election as critical will probably agree with this assertion. The voters were not only concerned; they were deeply polarized and this was reflected in the electoral map. As mentioned earlier in this chapter the popular vote in this election was divided almost evenly between Nixon and Humphrey, but within the Electoral College Nixon won overwhelmingly and this caused the electoral map to change considerably. The Republican take-over in the South represented a significant change in voting behavior, since a large section of the United States went from one party to another. Lawrence mentions the decline in voting participation in this election compared to 1960 and 1964, but asserts that according to Key the change in cleavage patterns is more important than voter turnout.³² Paulson explains the declining voter turnout by the increasing number and power of interest groups and their ability to influence voters.³³

Other essential criteria for a critical election are the emergence of a new cleavage between the two major parties, new coalitions and a new governing majority. A mere glance at the electoral map of the 1968 election will reveal a change in the political structure and the demise of the Democratic majority. The historic Democratic coalition, established during the New Deal, fell apart in this election as white southerners voted for Nixon and Wallace. But this election did not produce a new national majority party; divided government was still the rule. The Republicans had the presidency, while the Democrats controlled the Senate and the House. But Nixon's victory changed the center of gravity and enabled his administration to carry out its agenda together with the Wallace voters. It signaled a distinct move towards the right in American politics. According to Paulson, we saw a new party system in this election, with Democrats voting for Republican

³²David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 11 & 13

³³Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 7

candidates in the presidential election but continuing to define themselves as Democrats in congressional elections.

In spite of the above-mentioned characteristics, several scholars hesitate to list the 1968 election among those they categorize as critical. This is mostly due to the lack of partisan identification that emerged in the 1960s and the lack of a new majority. V. O. Key's definitions of critical elections are based on the party system of the nineteenth century, which experienced a very significant partisan loyalty, and scholars continue to emphasize this particular aspect of Key's definition. Another important argument is that in spite of the Republican victory most Americans continued to identify themselves as Democrats in the decades to come. This would continue to cause divided government as many Americans voted Republican in presidential elections and Democratic in general elections. This is what Paulson call "realignment at the top, dealignment at the bottom" and he further argues that this realignment at the top spread to the bottom in the 1990s.³⁴ Regarding lack of partisan loyalty, Paulson claims that though the umbrella parties are gone we now have two major parties "ideologically polarized", and that this circumstance is the new responsible party system.³⁵ The new conservative majority established itself primarily in the presidential election. The 1968 congressional election produced minor changes; the Democrats lost 4 seats in the House and 5 seats in the Senate, but still maintained their congressional majority. This shows why Paulson felt the need to invent a new approach to define critical elections after World War II. Walter Dean Burnham agrees with Paulson on the criticality of the 1968 election, but claims that the "partisan era" came to an absolute end in 1968, so that the criteria for critical elections might not be applied to any election after that.³⁶

Lawrence acknowledges the circumstances around the 1968 election suggesting that it was a turning point, but due to the lack of a new majority party he does not agree that this election qualifies as critical. He points towards the fact that the Republican Party continued as the minority party in terms of partisan identification.³⁷ But Lawrence seems to miss the fact that together the Nixon and Wallace electorate formed a new majority, a very conservative one. This indicates the strong emphasis Lawrence puts on loyalty to a single party as an important factor in critical elections, and shows that he remains

³⁴Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 24

³⁵ibid, 25

³⁶Walter Dean Burnham, "Critical Realignment. Dead or Alive?", in *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, ed. Byron E. Shafer et al. (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 115

³⁷David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 12

true to the traditional criteria established by V. O. Key. But even Lawrence admits that sudden events might weaken partisan loyalty in elections, and he stresses that this often applies to young people voting for the first time.³⁸ He is right in his allegations that the 1968 elections did not see any new partisan loyalties emerge, but he seems to emphasize one single factor too much in his interpretations, omitting other significant signs. Instead of characterizing the 1968 election as critical Lawrence mentions two *mini-realignments*, the first from 1946–50, and the second from 1966–70. He explains the decline of the Democratic majority in terms of processes, with Eisenhower’s victory as the first sign.³⁹

Apart from higher voter turnout, the 1968 election meets several important criteria for critical elections. This election includes, for example, several polarizing and important issue that cause considerable voter concern and further emphasize the criticality of the election. Though Key does not mention issues they nevertheless serve as the foundation for voter concern.

The main issues of the 1968 election were the war in Vietnam, race conflict and the economy. Racial differences seem to be heavily intertwined with other issues like extensive government spending on welfare programs. One or several particular, often polarizing and controversial issues is often a background for critical elections, though elections with serious issues like the 2004 election are not categorized as critical. The crucial argument in this context is to explore to what extent these issues led to movements in the electorate in 1968. To many Americans, especially the young ones on university campuses, the war in Vietnam came to represent everything that was immoral and unethical about the United States.⁴⁰ Most of the anti-war movement on campus supported the so-called New Left, which despised Johnson’s liberalism for its alleged inefficiency and cowardice. The students had probably been in favor of the original ideas behind the Great Society, but they eventually realized its shortcomings in the war against poverty. The New Left welcomed action, demonstrations and the notion that people should alter their lives themselves, something that would give them their self-esteem back. This author finds it most likely that they endorsed McGovern in the primaries; if they participated in voting at all, in the election they either refrained from voting or reluctantly supported Humphrey, somewhat disillusioned one might expect. The part of white, Middle America, that had voted for Johnson and supported the war, was the voting segment most likely to switch

³⁸David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 18

³⁹ibid, 1

⁴⁰Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism. A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Boston & New York: Bedford/St.Martin’s, 2007), 153

to Nixon and vote Republicans in coming presidential elections as well.⁴¹ According to the socio-economic aspects of American voting behavior these people resided in white, Protestant suburban America, and were part of the growing middle class that eventually would become the base of the Republican Party. But many of these voters would probably continue to define themselves as Democrats in general elections some time after the 1968 election.⁴²

Nixon had been very careful about how to approach the war, both in the primaries and in his presidential campaign, and he applied the term “de-Americanization” as a device to change the course of the war.⁴³ This was probably done of out caution, realizing that there seemed to be no easy way out, and also to attract conservative Democrats that did not rely on their party’s suggestions on how to deal with the war. The war in Vietnam was definitely a polarizing issue in the election, but there was another more compelling problem to separate voters and cause both aggression and frustration and that was the race issue.

Race had been a crucial political issue since the beginning of the 1960s, when the conformity of the 1950s was waning and the Civil Rights Movement that started in Birmingham in the 1950s began accelerating during the first half of the 1960s. Many Americans outside the South had realized that time had probably come to desegregate the region. But with the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act the Democratic Party began to lose support in the South. In the 1964 election year 40.8% of the public thought that race was a serious problem for the nation, and a challenge to the government.⁴⁴ White Southerners had clearly supported Goldwater over Johnson in 1964, while white people elsewhere appeared more divided. Blacks, if they ever participated in elections claimed that race was the most important factor for their support for the Democratic Party.⁴⁵ General voting behavior confirms the allegations that blacks identified more strongly with the Democratic Party than the Republican in this period, which might have to do with implementation of Johnson’s Civil Rights Law, and also Robert Kennedy’s high esteem among blacks.⁴⁶ The 1960s represent the significant transformation in the relationship between blacks and whites in the South as partners in the New

⁴¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 418

⁴²Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 24–25

⁴³Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 101–102

⁴⁴David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 64

⁴⁵ibid, 64

⁴⁶Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 23

Deal Coalition, as blacks began to become aware of their obvious rights according to the Civil Rights laws. The Deep South had been Johnson's weakest area in the 1964 election, an indication of what was to come. By August 1967 the polls showed that "racial problems" was the main worry of 8 out of 10 of those asked across the nation, and one year earlier white people agreed that blacks expected too much too fast. White Northerners had supported the Civil Rights Movement in the beginning but began to question its relevance after the civil rights laws were implemented. In addition many blacks saw Johnson as a representative of the unwillingness of white people to offer blacks the same rights, according to.⁴⁷ The once positive attitude among whites faced a backlash as many blacks turned to violence and riots. Blacks were regarded as ungrateful and demanding, as they did not accept the welfare programs as sufficient for their quality of life. This might have encouraged people to support Wallace.⁴⁸

In 1968 the decision of Wallace to run for President was in the spirit of Barry Goldwater. It might be tempting to categorize Wallace as solely concerned with preventing desegregation in the South, but voters did not consider this the most important plank in his platform. One third of the voters who were polled mentioned race as a reason to support him. But when it came to dislike Wallace, 26.7% mentioned racial factors.⁴⁹ Wallace himself did not openly appeal to racist attitudes, but instead he blamed the Communist movement for the civil rights movement, and asserted states' rights as a significant argument when asked about segregation.⁵⁰

Race also seemed to have been heavily intertwined in other issues relevant in the 1968 election, like government spending associated with Great Society welfare programs. Many of these programs were designed to accommodate the needs of the Afro-American population, and this seemed to have frustrated and annoyed especially white blue-collar workers, but also the white middle class. These programs were not in themselves racially oriented but became so due to the poverty and hopelessness of the many black communities.⁵¹ The black ghetto was frequently the origins of riots and looting prior to the 1968 election. Rising crime rates and unlawfulness were also major issues, and some voters saw them closely associated with racial problems, especially since statistics showed an increase in blacks being arrested for manslaughter rose by more than 130% between 1960

⁴⁷Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 13

⁴⁸ibid, 165

⁴⁹David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 67-68

⁵⁰Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 67

⁵¹David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 72

and 1970.⁵² Apart from Wallace, Nixon was the candidate most focused on “law and order” and many voters regarded this as the most important problem to be solved.

Even in the Northeast race became a question of how liberal the United States should be in the future. The New Deal liberalism seemed to have outplayed its role in some segments of the population. Race and the issues connected to race might have led to altered voting behavior and not only in the South, though it was more visible here. This movement led to a change in the power structure between the major parties, when the South was finally lost for the Democrats. Voter concern that change the electorate to such a considerable degree and establish new patterns are according to Key’s definitions of critical elections.

A strong third party is not among Key’s criteria for critical elections but it might be an indication of polarization among voters, as neither of the two major parties seems to satisfy them. But scholars differ in their view of third parties and their significance for critical elections. Paulson sees third party candidates in the 1960s as a clear indication of realignment and critical elections. Such candidates often differ considerably from the major parties’ candidates ideologically.⁵³ Paulson does emphasize their importance, but he also agrees with Mayhew in his criticism of their actual influence. Mayhew asserts that third parties also have the tendency to emerge between so-called critical elections and not right before or after. He mentions the Progressive Party, led by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, the Dixicrats in 1948 and Henry Wallace Progressives in 1948 as examples of this.⁵⁴ Ross Perot is another candidate that did well in elections not characterized as critical. In 1992 and 1996 he got respectively almost 20% and 8.5% of the popular votes.⁵⁵ A strong third party might symbolize the inability of the major parties to capture the public mood at grass-root levels, which might be due to particular issues that seem to engage the public more than the major parties had expected.

The 1968 election turned out to be one of the most dramatic in American political history, and though it did not clearly produce a new majority party it still signaled strong and lasting changes in American cultural and political life, and also in the American mentality, which definitely was moving in a distinctly conservative direction. The election was a definite farewell to the New Deal Coalition and also to certain aspects of Johnson’s Great Society, the War on Poverty and American liberalism, the Johnson-way, but surprisingly many Americans still identified themselves as Democrats. As mentioned

⁵²Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election That Changed America*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 1993), 15

⁵³ibid, 30

⁵⁴David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 78–79

⁵⁵www.sn1.no/H._Ross_Perot/1

earlier in this chapter Paulson asserts that this was reflected in congressional elections in decades to come. The remarkable election of 1968 took place 36 years after the last critical election in 1932, which might be regarded as a generational change as well, if we hold on to the idea of 25–40 years cycle between critical elections. In spite of the divided government that materialized after the election, it meets several criteria for a critical election, and Paulson seems to be right in claiming that all the traditional criteria for critical elections cannot be applied rigidly to modern, post World War II elections. The intermezzo with Jimmy Carter in 1976–1980 that followed after Nixon might be interpreted as the need for a decent and presumably reliable leader after the Watergate and Vietnam failures. But the choice of remedy should prove insufficient four years later.

Morning in America: The Election of Ronald Reagan

The 1980 election was supposed to be a close race, but Reagan won 489 of the electoral votes and split the Democratic majority. His victory was regarded as an electoral landslide even though he managed to achieve only 50.1% of the popular vote. But it gave him the mandate he had hoped for and Reagan colored the electoral map red, apart from five blue states, Hawaii, Minnesota, Georgia, West Virginia and Maryland.⁵⁶ The Electoral College favored Ronald Reagan; he definitely had the margins on his side. The voter turnout was 52.6%, which is average for the period after 1972. The Republicans also gained majority in the Senate for the first time in twenty-six years; they won thirty-three new seats in the House, which was sufficient to enable the new president to pass laws in cooperation with the Republican majority in the Senate and a coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats in the House.⁵⁷

During the campaign Reagan seemed to have asked the essential question when he addressed the voters in a televised debate with Jimmy Carter: “Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago?”⁵⁸ In addition to addressing a relevant question Reagan also became spokesman for the atmosphere of the 80s, an era where individualism and materialism came to play a larger role in the American society. It has been argued that Reagan weakened the Democratic coalition since Carter lost many votes from earlier loyal voters,

⁵⁶Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside back cover

⁵⁷Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 1

⁵⁸Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 314

such as Roman Catholics, Jews and blue-collar workers.⁵⁹ Reagan won all but the very poor and the very young, and he also lacked considerable support from academia.⁶⁰ Also other groups, primarily Democratic, like teachers and liberals, voted Republican to a larger extent than previously.⁶¹ They became what are known as the Reagan Democrats. The gender gap was evident when it came to the Reagan Democrats; more men than women changed their voting behavior in this election and it is obvious that Reagan appealed more to men than to women.⁶² While men voted for Reagan by a margin of 15% compared to Carter, women divided their votes equally between the two candidates, who maybe regarded him as more military oriented than Jimmy Carter.⁶³ Reagan was the first Republican candidate to join hands with the religious right, an initiative that gave him enormous support among white fundamentalists and also the possibility to put social issues on the agenda.⁶⁴ In spite of his clear victory Reagan fought hard to win the South, although this part of the country had been lost for the Democrats in the 1968 election, but his standpoint on military and defense questions and cultural issues came to his advantage here.⁶⁵ It seems as though the Democratic Party identification was hard to give up, still 47% of the American Electorate identified themselves as Democrats in 1980, compared to 23% Republicans.⁶⁶ This shows the strong position of the person Ronald Reagan as a candidate in this election, because in the years to come this party identification would decline on behalf of Republicans and Independents.⁶⁷ Even the 1980 election saw a third party candidate; Independent John Anderson received 6.6% of the popular vote, but carried no states. Voters regarded him as more liberal than Carter and he seemed to have attracted independents and academics.⁶⁸ Many previous Carter supporters, who found the incumbent too conservative and passive, might also have endorsed him.

But one of them main reasons for Reagan's victory was his particular charismatic

⁵⁹Milton C. Cummings,JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 495

⁶⁰Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 129

⁶¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 495

⁶²Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 128

⁶³Milton C. Cummings,JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 340

⁶⁴Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 127

⁶⁵ibid, 135

⁶⁶Milton C. Cummings,JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 341

⁶⁷ibid, 341

⁶⁸Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 494

personality and his well-run and well-financed campaign. Scholars disagree on the impact on the election of Reagan's star image and argue that against a less inspiring candidate Carter might have won.⁶⁹ Reagan undoubtedly managed to restore the presidency and make it trustworthy again. His attitude and rhetoric were loaded with hope for a glorious future for the United States and this was a message frustrated Americans had been waiting for. The fact that the Carter campaign underestimated his impact on the public came to cost Carter the re-election.⁷⁰

The 1980 Election in a Critical Context

The period preceding the election undoubtedly experienced extensive voter concern, and one might claim that there was a distinct yearning for change in America. The voter concern contributed to a considerable movement within the electorate, but the electoral map did not change radically from the 1972 election, which further confirmed that this election was the continuation of the conservative trend established in 1968. In fact, Reagan carried fewer states than Nixon did in 1972. Like Nixon in 1968 he did not manage to establish a Republican majority, but it was a stronger mandate than Nixon's. There is no doubt that parts of the electoral movement might be attributed to Reagan's personality and smoothly run campaign, and this raises the question of the candidate's contribution to a critical election. But then the 1952 election should have been regarded as critical too since Eisenhower also changed the pattern of the electoral map and managed to be the first Republican to win an election since 1928. This interpretation, to include a charismatic candidate in the criteria would probably be to stretch Key's intentions a bit too far.

Also in the decade between 1950 and 1960 most Americans identified themselves as Democrats, but still voting for Eisenhower in two elections. This shows how strong Eisenhower's position was among Americans regardless of their partisan loyalty. But the main difference here is that while Eisenhower was an admired war hero who deserved to be president Reagan emerged as somebody who turned up trumps. Reagan did not alter the voters' party identification in general in this election, but he might have served as a transition for many Democrats. His victory is probably a combination of his charismatic and optimistic personality and the particular issues at stake in this election. The voter turnout in this election was not particularly higher than other elections in the 1970s and

⁶⁹Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 138

⁷⁰*ibid*, 131

1980s, which makes the 1980 election unable to meet V. O. Key's criterion in this aspect.

There were two main issues in the 1980 election that moved the electorate: The economy, including inflation and unemployment, and foreign policy, including America's diminishing status in the world, with the Iranian hostage crisis as a symbol of this decline.⁷¹ These two issues had contributed to a severe depression in the national mood throughout the late 1970s. The issues are somewhat similar to 1968, namely economic depression and America's role on the international arena, but the circumstances and issues in 1968 proved considerably more dramatic and serious. This is explained by the severe turmoil that haunted the American society throughout 1968 as explained earlier in this chapter, leading to aggressiveness and violence.

There are several groups that shifted from Democratic to Republican in this election, namely blue-collar workers, union members, ethnics and Catholics.⁷² To most of them the economy was probably the most important issue, since they obviously answered "no" to the question Reagan posed during debates about being better or worse off than before. Union members and blue-collar workers used to be part of the Democratic base, along with Catholics and white ethnics. The fact that they voted for Reagan indicates a major shift in established voting behavior in this election, but the term Reagan Democrats shows that their decision was closely connected to the candidate himself. Reagan did not attract many new voters from academia, which signals that these groups voted according to expected voting behavior. The same applied to blacks, which did not switch to Reagan. Jews, who used to be loyal Democrats, supported Reagan to a great extent, especially orthodox Jews.⁷³ This might be explained by Reagan's positive approach to religious groups, and his identification with the Main Street part of the Republican Party. Key's emphasis on party identification has a weak position in the 1980 election, when the candidate and not merely the party seems to have caused the electoral cleavage. But Reagan acted nevertheless the spokesman of the Republican Party's values.

The election saw the rise of a gender gap that was to persist during later elections as well. Reagan seems to have attracted men more than women, who probably regarded him as strongly in opposition to the feminist movement and too trigger-happy. Reagan's success among men might be explained by his distinct hawkish approach to foreign policy and communism. The fact that women turned away from Republicans in this election might be explained by the effects of the feminist movement in the 70s, when women

⁷¹Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 130

⁷²ibid, 127-128

⁷³ibid, 128

became more independent and began to engage themselves in social issues such as gender equality, abortion rights. Many women's endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment and pro-choice organizations were often in opposition to traditional Republican values.⁷⁴

Ronald Reagan was more than a president, he was the personification of an era but also of traditional American values, and to many Americans he personally represented the remedy needed to get the country out of its depression and bring back the persistent optimism that is an inherent part of the American psyche. Reagan's background as a movie star was ridiculed by many of his opponents but came to represent the intertwining of media, movies and politics, in a way that also Kennedy had managed in 1960. Both men were photogenic and comfortable in television debates. The idea that everything is possible in America, that dreams come true and that there is a "morning in America" was a very important message for Americans after the depressing late 1970s. Reagan appeared as Carter's opposite, introducing hope for the future. Reagan was a candidate tailor-made for media exposure, as John F. Kennedy had been. Kennedy also spread enthusiasm with his message about The New Frontier.

But it is a fact that Carter had lost his support among Americans long before Reagan became his opponent. On the background of Carter's low rating approval and Reagan's well-directed campaign and charismatic performance throughout the campaign, his victory is probably not so amazing. All the issues worked against Carter, and he came to be blamed for everything that was wrong with America, while Reagan symbolized everything that was right and glorious about America in case people had forgotten this in the last four years. He was presented like the arch American cowboy riding into the sunset, after having cleared up the mess. Carter did not come forward as very liberal, he was a conservative Democrat, and against a less charismatic and popular candidate than Reagan he might have been re-elected.

The 1980 election is a good example of an election when the candidate matters to a significant degree. Apart from the 1952 election, the 1992 election with President George W. H. Bush versus Governor Bill Clinton is another example of a charismatic opponent defeating an incumbent. Reagan captured the atmosphere of the beginning of the 1980s with its focus on materialism and prosperity. The 1980 election is not as critical as the 1968 election; it might probably be characterized as mini-critical. It emphasized and continued the conservative initiative from 1968. Apart from comparing the two elections to Key's definitions, one also has to compare them to previous critical elections.

⁷⁴Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 81

Then and Now: Modern Versus Traditional Critical Elections

Modern elections differ from earlier critical elections in many respects; not only regarding the development of society in general. The most compelling divergence is the weakening of party identification after World War II, resulting in more candidate-centered elections. But there are evidently also some common features. Wars, economy and race appear to be common issues in many elections, issues that traditionally have contributed to polarization within American society. The economy was a crucial issue in 1896, and also in 1968, 1980 and again in 1992. Voter concern and engagement, often also turmoil prior to the elections are characteristics of the elections of 1860, 1896 and 1968; although Mayhew asserts that extensive pre-election turbulence characterizes so-called non-critical elections as well.⁷⁵ One might argue that the 2004 election saw a remarkable high temperature in the campaigning on both sides, and polarized the voters. In 1860, pre-election turmoil resulted in four parties in the presidential election. Abraham Lincoln's 39.9% of the votes, which represented no mandate, enabled him to establish a new governing coalition and a new political agenda, just like Nixon in 1968, and also Reagan in 1980. The two minor parties in the 1860 election achieved respectively 18.1% and 12.6% of the votes, something that signals the special circumstances and ambivalence among the voters. In 1860 race was undoubtedly a particularly dividing issue, and was a contributing factor to the civil war one year later. The race issue and the emergence of additional parties are similar aspects to the 1968 election. But otherwise the conditions are too different to be comparable. It only confirms the assumption that race is and will perhaps always continue to be an issue in a multiethnic country like the United States. According to Paulson race is "modern versus traditional values",⁷⁶ and in this respect this allegation seems to fit in with the atmosphere of both 1860 and 1968.

In 1896 the Republican candidate William McKinley won the election with 51.1% of the popular vote, and 271 out of 447 electoral votes.⁷⁷ The election resulted in a transformation of the electoral map and it established the Republican majority in the North East, and the Democrats in the West and in the South. This election also saw a Republican majority in Congress, and ended divided government. It was the start of a strong Republican majority until 1932, only interrupted by the Wilson years. In this

⁷⁵David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 21

⁷⁶Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 28

⁷⁷Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 148

respect the 1968 and the 1980 elections are not comparable, neither established a clear new majority, and divided government continued.

In 1896 a major transformation of American society saw the growth of manufacturing and industry on behalf of farming, and many people moved to urban areas in search of work. The years prior to the 1896 election experienced an increase in unemployment up to 20%, and the fact that 70% of the wealth belonged to 10% of the population disgusted many people.⁷⁸ Urban workers and union members voted for the Republican candidate, like in 1980.⁷⁹ This is a voter segment that would identify themselves with the Democrats from 1932 on. Race continued to be a polarizing issue. Even though the Reconstruction was no success blacks still had the possibility to vote, something that frightened the white population who during the 1890s disenfranchised the blacks.⁸⁰ This election saw a lasting cleavage between the major parties, similar to 1968.

The 1932 election is one of the most important elections in the context of critical elections and the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s came to dominate the election. Again the economy was the prevalent issue in an election. There was also an ideological aspect of Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory, because it posed questions about the course of the nation. The 1932 election established new voting coalitions, something that also occurred in the 1968 election. The 1968 election is forever linked to the 1932 election because it dissolved the New Deal coalition initiated in this election.

Wars do not seem to have been an important issue in many of the previous elections, and that has something to do with America's role in the world. The United States appeared more isolationist in the 19th century, and was not fully integrated on the international area before World War II and this explains why war was not an issue in earlier times. War appears to have been an issue in many post World War II elections, like in 1968, 1972, 1980 and 2004. Apparently, war is an issue in both critical and non-critical elections.

Due to the technological, cultural and political development previous critical elections differ from post war elections in many aspects, but it is still interesting to discover that certain issues seem to be timeless and continues to worry the voters to a significant degree. The electoral structure is also totally different, with direct primaries and candidate-centered elections. But the 1896 election is interesting in this aspect because it signals a new direction in presidential elections, as it appears considerably more candidate- and campaign focused than earlier elections. The educational level has weakened partisan

⁷⁸Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 148

⁷⁹ibid, 153

⁸⁰ibid, 149

loyalty, though a certain party identification still exist, though it materialized itself contradictory in 1980 with the Reagan Democrats. As Democrats become more liberal and Republicans more conservative one might also find a large segment defining themselves as independents.

The complexity of modern society might be accused of the low voting turnout. Many people feel that their vote does not count and that politicians never attend to their needs anyway. Still, the elections have something in common. In a culturally heterogeneous country like the United States the racial aspect will always be relevant, and since America is a capitalist country the economy and how to face challenges in this context releases strong engagement on either side, since fiscal policy is part of democracy. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 questions related to homeland security and international terrorism have become significant issues. But all these issues seem to appear in non-critical elections as well; something that indicates that one might not draw a direct line between serious issues and critical elections.

The Times They Are a' Changing: Why Traditional Criteria Might Not be Appropriate

When Key introduced his criteria for critical elections partisan loyalty was an essential aspect of his interpretation and the candidate's qualities were not given as separate a part of the context. The party itself was the main emphasis, though Roosevelt had indeed been a charismatic and profiled candidate, but it had still been the Democratic Party that was the main focus of the victory. After World War II the way presidential elections were carried out changed due to substantial economic, educational and demographical changes within the United States. The development of changes within the processes of primary elections and the emphasis on candidate-centered elections contributed to disagreement between scholars on the criticality of post war elections. Only Paulson seems to have a different interpretation with his dealignment theory, and argues that partisan loyalty must be regarded differently in modern elections.

According to Paulson the old criteria for critical elections are too rigid for postwar elections, and he also claims that no previously critical elections have ever met all the required variables.⁸¹ He also argues that it would be wrong to compare modern elections with pre-modern ones, and that even the older ones differed considerably from each

⁸¹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 149

other.⁸² It is essential to find common characteristics that will apply to modern elections as well, and recognize that the electoral agenda now depends on different issues and contexts. But even if the impact of the different criteria might differ from election to election some traits must be evident, according to Paulson. An election has to produce what he calls “a new pattern of electoral outcomes”,⁸³ indicating that the changes might not establish a new majority party, but be significant enough to embody a direction that emphasizes this trend. The election must also be able to generate a new agenda, implemented by a new coalition, and based on the new political and cultural cleavages brought forth by the election.⁸⁴ This thesis claims that Paulson in many ways extends Key’s intentions, though he was right in characterizing 1968 as a critical election. But it is highly debatable whether his assertion might be applied to elections after 1968.

The question is if the way campaigns are carried out also might be included in modern criteria, since this might influence voter behavior in a public already heavily concerned. Independent voters are likely to switch between parties due to smoothly run campaigns, but it is likely that they would have done so anyway. A particularly charismatic and exposed candidate might be a contributing factor in a critical election, but should not be listed as a new, equal criterion. Charismatic candidates might or might not answer voter concern better than other candidates, but most of all they inspire and spread enthusiasm, independent of voter concern. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, there was considerable voter concern prior to the 2004 election—and it is an interesting question what might have been the outcome if John Kerry had been a charismatic and inspiring candidate. This thesis argues that charismatic candidates might alter the course of an election in an unanticipated direction, but that does not indicate a critical election according to Key’s definitions.

Both the 1968 and the 1980 elections have characteristics suitable to Key’s definition of critical elections, like voter concern and movement within the electorate due to extensive polarizing issues. But as mentioned earlier in this thesis, also non-critical elections have had polarizing issues, but then without resulting in electoral cleavage. There is a resemblance in the national mood in the times preceding the two elections; both 1968 and 1980 were turbulent years in America though 1968 was inflicted with more violence and aggressiveness than 1980. This thesis asserts that of the two the 1968 election appears as the more critical of the two, since it dissolved the New Deal Coalition, and contributed to

⁸²Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 147

⁸³ibid, 148

⁸⁴ibid, 149

a significant change in voting behavior when the Democratic Party lost the South. It also signaled a lasting conservative trend in American political and cultural life. The election established a voting coalition of consisting of a majority of white, Protestant suburban voters who signed a lasting companionship with the Republican Party.

Neither election saw the emergence of a clear new majority, but this might be explained by the waning party identification after WWII, or the delayed process by certain Democrats to identify as Republicans. The 1980 election seems to a great extent to have been a vote for a particular candidate more than for the Republican Party. This in itself does not exclude a critical election, but it does not appear to be within the limits of Key's definitions. May other issues like race, gender or generational change lead to new voting coalitions that will cause a critical election? May the way the election campaigns are carried out be of any significance? But by applying these criteria one obviously departs from the original definitions by Key, but future scholars might redefine Key's approach and include other criteria more suitable to modern elections. Gender, race and campaign methods might contribute to changes in some elections, but such changes might also be a consequence of engagement and enthusiasm. There has to be a certain aspect of partisan loyalty in addition to the candidate's performance to meet the traditional interpretation of critical elections. The author of this thesis alleges that the 1980 election is an extension of the conservative trend established in 1968. The 1980 election is remembered mostly because it came to be named The Reagan Revolution, associating the election more or less solely to a particular candidate. 40 years later a new remarkable election took place, and according to the cyclic occurrence of critical elections many scholars probably anticipated a new critical election in the presidential election of 2008.

Chapter 4

Obama's Victory: Analyses and Comparisons

This chapter discusses and analyzes the 2008 election in the context of critical elections based on both V. O. Key's definition and the findings in chapter three. In addition the thesis here presents and explores different indicators and characteristics in four states that previously had been strongly Republican, namely Indiana, Virginia, North Carolina, and Colorado. Virginia, Colorado and Indiana had not gone Democratic since 1964, while North Carolina was last carried by Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976. It is of crucial importance to the question of criticality to discuss why and how these states turned from strongly Republican to Democratic pluralities in the 2008 election. These states are demographically and geographically different from each other, and this makes the comparison interesting. The movement in the electorate in some of these states contributed so crucially to Obama's victory that they are part of the claim that the 2008 election might be characterized as critical. It is essential to explore the impact of Obama's campaign in these states, and try to decide whether voter concern or the exposure of Obama's well run campaign contributed most to the to the electoral change in these states. The analyses of these states are based on demographical statistics about population traits like ethnicity, education and poverty levels. These indicators are chosen because they are decisive factors in voting behavior, according to the studies discussed in chapter two. In a critical election changes in voting behavior are supposed to alter the electoral map. The analysis here shows how the increase in non-white ethnic voting, in particular was an important factor in those states.

The 2008 election has several similarities with the 1968 and the 1980 elections such as an approaching recession, an unpopular incumbent and the nation's declining image

on the international arena. These factors were materialized through the unpopular and complicated war in Iraq, in addition to the military presence in Afghanistan. These issues made the year preceding the election turbulent and dramatic. But contrary to the earlier analyzed elections, the 2008 saw no important third party. This chapter only weighs whether the 2008 election was critical but also shows how this election has more in common with the 1980 than the 1968 election. It also describes and analyzes media's presentation of the election.

V. O. Key and the 2008 Election

Voter Concern

Voter concern is a natural and expected component in any election. Without it the election would lose its natural tension and challenge, but as described earlier in the thesis, the extent of voter concern varies considerably from election to election. It is in the nature of the two major parties in American politics to point out failures and incompetence regarding the opposing party's preceding decisions and policies, and thereby trying to increase and also initiate concern among the public.

V. O. Key presented his definition in the 1950s, a decade commonly identified as having a far more conformist and homogenous society than the first decade of the 21st century and as lacking the challenges of the often-swift changes in politics that the nation faces today through the mass media. He first and foremost applied his visions of voter concern to elections in other eras, such as 1896 and 1932 when the general pace of life was slower. This might also explain the 25–50 year cycle that is supposed to occur between the critical elections. With a slower pace people probably more easily adapted to the politics of the various administrations and each generation differed from the previous one. With today's faster pace modern voter concern might also to a larger extent include elements of impatience and frustrations as many people expect presidents and other politicians to deal with challenges and problems almost immediately. If politicians fail to meet the public's dissatisfaction, many voters will probably begin to look for new answers and approaches, something that might be to the advantage of rather unknown candidates whose solutions have not been tested. Minutes after McCain had uttered his famous words "the fundamentals of the American economy is strong", the statement circulated on the internet and the public's response was immediately reflected in McCain's rating. Voters instantly began to question McCain's ability to handle the growing financial crisis, and came to a negative conclusion. McCain's statement was also a wonderful gift to the

Obama campaign.

Today's voter concern is often measured through polls asking the question "Do you think the nation is on wrong track?" In December 2006 58% of the people asked answered "no" to this question, while 28% disagreed.¹ Two years later the numbers were reversed, paving the way for ideological change and a potentially critical election. This thesis suggests that such questions might also have the certain, but yet immeasurable effect that people might begin to believe that the majority is right, and wonder why they have not yet discovered what seem like an obvious fact to a large part of the public. How to approach voter concern in a way appropriate to the swift presentation of political issues on the Internet is an important and crucial task for candidates, and the way the Obama campaign faced the growing voter concern seem to have been decisive to his victory. He employed both the Internet and texting in his effort to meet these challenges and reach worried voters. This way of encountering voter concern may also reveal the generational gap between Obama and McCain and their staffs and strategies.

The extensive voter concern prior to the 2008 presidential election was presented earlier in this thesis, for the most part as an explanation of why and how this election came to be regarded as extraordinary and important in many regards. As mentioned earlier in the thesis there was a considerable voter concern in the electorate prior to the 2004 election, but it did not cause any dramatic change in the electorate. The post-election map in 2004 looked more or less like the map after the 2000 election. Red and blue states did not trade places, except for New Mexico that went to Gore in 2000, and New Hampshire, which went to Kerry in 2004.² The media appears to be the main contributor to the increase in voter concern, not the opposing party, as Key would have anticipated. Voter concern of the 21st century might accelerate to an extent not comparable to earlier times and might be influenced by several new factors, like the Internet and other new media. David Lawrence emphasizes the higher levels of education today compared to the decades prior to World War II and claims that this makes voters more capable in dealing with the flow of information, which in turn means that their need for the parties to explain and interpret difficult issues has declined.³ Voter concern arguably might lessen as a result of this, because voters might more easily find answers to their questions. But voters today are not necessarily more informed than before, or more competent to face

¹Charles M. Madigan, *Destiny Calling: How the People Elected Barack Obama*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 2009), 93

²Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside back cover

³David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 21

complicated issues. In the elections Key refer to, there were probably fewer issues to relate to, the society was less complicated and the information provided did not originate in dozens of different channels.

Though voters today are able to gather information from numerous channels society and, one might claim, politics in general have become extremely more complicated. A constant flow of information on political issues through the Internet does not always guarantee an objective presentation or deep analysis. Americans in general are not a newspaper reading society anymore, for example when compared to Norway.⁴ The elite reads the major national papers; people in general seem to read local papers, not necessarily dealing with national issues and politics. To many voters the Internet is probably the main supplier of information on political issues, since the Internet is available to most people, but also here many Americans find themselves in a jungle of views and beliefs which makes it complicated to take a stand and conclude. Not everyone is capable of scrutinizing sources, and instead of addressing parties for answers they turn to the candidates. Candidates must figure out how to meet the concern of these people, who no longer read or analyze the leaders in the main papers, or listen to political debates on public radio or TV. This group probably consists of people without higher education, young people and people who claim to be indifferent to participation in elections. Obama's campaign seems to have met voter concern in a way never done before, through the new media, but also through his enthusiastic campaign crew, but these circumstances might not necessarily lead to a critical election. This thesis asserts that it does probably go beyond Key's original intentions to include these factors in his definitions.

The 2008 voter concern has similarities to voter concern prior to the elections both in 1968 and in 1980. All three elections experienced an incumbent with an extremely low approval rating, though George W. Bush was not up for re-election. We found in chapter three that the extensive voter concern prior to the 1968 election developed into aggressiveness and nation wide riots. People were angry as they saw the America of the 1950s and early 1960s develop into a society where traditional American values appeared to crumble. To many Americans the war in Vietnam, the growing counterculture and the failing economy seemed to divide the nation more than it could possibly bear. The dramatic 1968 primaries and the election of Richard Nixon have little resemblance to the 2008 primaries and presidential election. There was no aggressiveness and rioting in 2008, and the voter concern was eventually blended with enthusiasm and hope for the future.

⁴www.people-press.org/report/?pageid=1792
www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kud/dok/regpubl/prop/2010-2011/prop-1-s20102011/11.html?id=617272 (acc. November 29, 2010)

Richard Nixon did not have the charismatic qualities necessary for initiating inspiration and hope and was regarded merely as a crucial lifesaver to the discontented part of the electorate, in itself an extremely important task. The 1968 election seems nevertheless to have been more of a resignation, a kind of choice between the lesser of two “evils”.

During 2008 the voters were concerned about the way the nation was going if the Republicans should continue in power. Voter concern prior to the financial crisis might better be described as the accumulation of several years of growing discontent with the neo-conservative ideology of the Bush administration. This ideology appears to have been the foundation for the invasion in Iraq and how to conduct the war on terrorism. The financial crisis released what might be characterized as an immediate voter concern, while the declining support for the Bush administration and the Republican Party is more of a voter concern based on a longer process. The financial crisis was nevertheless regarded as a result of the fiscal politics of the Bush administration.⁵

The role of Obama in this voter concern might better be compared to Ronald Reagan’s role in the 1980 campaign, and the former actor’s ability to spread enthusiasm and hope for the future. In chapter three we found that in 1980, America’s image on the international scene had suffered a serious setback, and Reagan’s “Morning in America” inspired millions of Americans. Reagan’s positive approach and willingness to make America great and glorious again moved even concerned Democrats, who were disappointed with the way Carter had led the nation. In the same way Barack Obama answered the voter’s concern with his promise of hope, change and renewal, and turned voter concern into enthusiasm and positive energy.

Modern voter concern is probably a result of our hectic way of life, and our impatience with politicians caused by our expectations that almost everything might be resolved quickly. The role of the new media, like the Internet and text messages nevertheless makes this election and its voter concern different. Key’s theory might be applied to the 2008 presidential election in the sense that all presidential candidates have to face voter concern to a certain degree. Voter concern is an important ingredient in all elections, but this aspect must be seen in context with other criteria for critical elections. Alone, this variable does not tell us so much about the criticality of an election. According to Key, for voter concern to become a cause of a critical election it has to be followed by an increase in voter turnout. Key’s definition is based on a direct link between this concern and voter’s inclination to cast their votes.

⁵Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 587

Extensive and Higher Voter Turnout

Key emphasized high voter turnout as an essential sign of a critical election, since voter concern supposedly encouraged more people to vote, and thereby would probably change the electoral map. It is in the nature of a critical election that voters feel that very much is at stake in that particular election and that every vote counts. The 2008 election saw an increase in voter turnout and is compared to the 1960 and the 1968 elections on that basis.⁶ 60.7% voted in this election, which is up from 51.5% in 1996.⁷ Of the five million new voters in this election blacks represented two millions.⁸ Blacks also accounted for 13% of Americans eligible to vote, this up 2% from the 2004 election, and 96% of black voters supported Barack Obama.⁹ 65.2% of all Afro-Americans eligible to vote participated in this election, which is up 4.9% from 2004. Whites participated at a lower level than in 2004, down 1.1%.¹⁰ The decrease in white voting is probably not statistically significant enough to be regarded as a backlash, but the increase in non-white voting might be ascribed to race. Among blacks it was particularly women and young voters that increased their participation. Black female voters went up 5.1% from 2004. Young, black voters increased their vote turnout by 8.7% from 2004.¹¹ It must be added that the high voter turnout among blacks was a Southern phenomenon.¹² Also other non-white ethnic groups contributed to the high voter turnout, Latinos increased their participation 1.3% from 2004, and the overall Latino population grew from 16.1 million in 2004 to 19.5 million in 2008.¹³

All over the country voters lined up for hours to vote, paying no attention to bad weather conditions and old-fashioned voting machinery. In Atlanta lines were 10 hours long and all over America different organizations encouraged people to vote.¹⁴ From the International Space Station astronauts sent video messages telling people of the necessity of voting. A judge in Ohio said that people without a regular address might use a bench in the park as their home address.¹⁵ On all levels of society the importance to get out the vote was stressed and this might have contributed to the high turnout. According to the conclusions in chapter two this aspect deals with the psychological circumstances

⁶Nancy Gibbs, *TIME Commemorative Issue*, November 8, 2008, 34

⁷*USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 4A

⁸www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf

⁹*USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 4A

¹⁰www.pewresearch.org/pubs/1209/racial-ethnic-voters-presidential-election

¹¹ibid

¹²www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/12/AR2010051204687_pf.html

¹³www.pewresearch.org/pubs/1209/racial-ethnic-voters-presidential-election

¹⁴Nancy Gibbs, *TIME Commemorative Issue*, November 17, 2008, 34

¹⁵ibid

of voting. But voter turnout varied significantly throughout the United States, and the increase was especially strong in areas where the Obama campaign focused on young people, Afro-Americans and Latinos.¹⁶ It might be insulting to claim that blacks and Latinos voted for Obama because of his skin color. That would equal the allegation that women voted for Hillary Clinton in the primaries because she is a woman. But Obama's combination of being both black and a very credible candidate, presumably capable of dealing with the nation's challenges may well have been extra attractive to African-Americans in particular.

Other factors than voter concern might influence voter turnout. A candidate that inspires hopes and changes might trigger people's enthusiasm and dedication to vote and be just as important as depressing voter concern. On November 5, 2008 *USA Today* portrayed a black voter expressing the view that standing in line for hours to vote is nothing compared to having waited 300 years for this moment to come.¹⁷ This underlines the psychological aspect of voting as well. The decision to vote in the 2008 election also reveals a certain stubbornness and a dedication probably not seen very often in previous presidential elections. It might be a result of the growing voter concern that had developed in American society since the 2006 midterm election, but it might also be attributed to the special circumstances of this election, namely the probable election of an Afro-American candidate to the nation's highest office. In chapter three we found that the 1980 election did not show a radical growth in voter turnout.. But according to Mayhew also elections that never came to be categorized as critical saw high voter turnout, like the 1952 and 1960 election.¹⁸ Paulson agrees with Mayhew that there is no clear connection between voter turnout and critical elections. Voter turnout in one particular election must be seen in relation to elections prior to the election.¹⁹ One might argue that the 2008 election meets Paulson's claims and the required criterion in Key's definition is met since the turnout in this election was higher than for example in the 2000 and 2004 elections.²⁰ Apart from the 1996 election every presidential election after 1972 has seen a turnout between 51% and 53%.²¹ In short it is also essential to explore which issues triggered the increased voter participation in this election.

¹⁶Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 586

¹⁷*USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 4A

¹⁸David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 73

¹⁹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 17

²⁰Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), 333, 357

²¹www.infoplease.com/pa/A0781453.html (acc. November 30, 2010)

Issues: It's the Economy

David Mayhew asserts that particular issues are not essential to Key's definition of critical elections.²² It is true that particular issues are not mentioned explicitly in Key's definition of 1955, but issues must nevertheless be regarded as an implicit factor in his theory, since it is hard to imagine serious voter concern without issues. The findings in previous chapters show that one or several significant issues often dominate critical elections. It might be alleged that certain issues always dominate a presidential election; otherwise the candidates would not have so much to argue about. This is partly what happened in 1960, when Kennedy and Nixon did not seem to disagree significantly on the main issues in the election, and the fact that Kennedy won the televised debates seems to have been decisive. We found in chapter three that the 1968 election had several crucial issues that divided the nation, making that election a watershed in American social and political life. The issues in this election divided the nation considerably and contributed to a conservative trend in American social and political life. The 2004 election was also characterized by focus on a serious issue, namely the war on terrorism with the invasion in Iraq as a relevant background, which contributed to a high temperature in the election debates.

This 2008 election was the first post 9/11 election not particularly influenced by the terrorist attacks. This thesis alleges that this might be a sign that Americans had been able to move ahead and focus on domestic issues again, though Paulson claims that security related issues will characterize elections after 2004.²³ Republicans had earlier had the advantage of being regarded as more reliable when dealing with terrorist threats and security policy, and this might be an explanation why Bush was re-elected in spite of extensive voter concern in 2004. Paulson predicts that issues like the war on terror and other security related issues would continue to characterize American elections after 2004 as well.²⁴ The fact that this did not prove right shows that the economy is and has always been a very important issue in modern times. *USA Today* writes that 63% of those who voted stated that the economy was the most important issue in this election.²⁵ Historically, Democrats tend to draw a majority of voters in times of economic crises. The war in Iraq counted for 10% of important issues, along with terrorism and health care. The economy emerged as a crucial factor in September, after both parties had chosen

²²David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 22

²³Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 178

²⁴*ibid*, 178

²⁵*USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 4A

their candidates and thus the economy was not a significant issue in the primaries. Voters who identified the economy as the overwhelming issue voted for Obama by 2 to 1.²⁶ A survey carried out by *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* one month before the election clearly indicated that voters who found the economy the most pressing issue supported Obama by fifteen points.²⁷ In addition to the financial crisis there were no immediate challenges to deal with except for the ideological aspects mentioned earlier in the chapter.

It is not evident that a financial crisis as such contributes to a critical election. In 1992 the economy was also an important issue in the election and played a part in Clinton's victory. Most of all Obama benefited from John McCain's statement on the economy. Chapter three shows that there were more serious issues able to move the electorate both in 1968 and in 1980. We found that both the economy and conflicts on the international arena, together with a severe national depression led to electoral changes. Especially the 1968 election stands out as distinct when it comes to issues, and in addition to economic conditions and war it also faced racial problems as a major issue. The issues in 1968 also reflect a major change of ideology and paved the way for conservative politics for decades to come. Also the 2004 election was distinctly affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their relevance to possible terrorist attacks. The temperature in this election was probable quite as high as in 2008, and engaged people outside the United States as well

The journalist and political commentator Joe Klein asserts that the election was so much more than just a question of issues. It was a confirmation of a substantial alteration of the nation. He compares Obama to both Kennedy and Reagan, both charismatic candidates and winners who had clear visions of a new start for America.²⁸ Both Kennedy and Reagan benefited from smoothly run campaigns, and both candidates' had the obvious "star quality" that Americans seem to appreciate. Both inspired hope and enthusiasm among millions of Americans. Klein also compares this election to two former elections, which in his opinion pointed towards change, namely the 1960, and the 1980 elections. Klein does not mention the term critical election but he focuses on changes, which is an outcome of critical elections. While the 1960 election was never considered critical, the 1980 election has been categorized as a so-called "soft realignment".²⁹ The Reagan period is often also referred to as *The Reagan Revolution*.³⁰ It is evident that Klein does

²⁶David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments, A Critique of an American Genre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 2A

²⁷Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 353

²⁸Joe Klein, "Passing the Torch", *Time Magazine Commemorative Issue*, Nov 2008, 26

²⁹www.tnr.com/article/america-the-liberal

³⁰www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/ronaldreagan

not emphasize issues as the most important aspect in this election.

The issues are important in critical elections, though Key never mentioned them explicitly, maybe since all elections involve issues. But it is nevertheless crucial to the definitions of a critical election that those issues and the voter concern they release will lead to distinct changes in the electorate and establish new coalitions.

New Coalitions and a New Majority, Based on a Cleavage in the Electorate

The essential question in this context is whether and/or how the Obama victory was the result of or established new coalitions. It is a fact that ethnic minorities, especially blacks, and young people, endorsed Obama, but this is probably no more than traditional Democratic voting behavior, according to the section on voting behavior in chapter two. But these groups appeared to have supported Obama to a larger extent than they had done with previous Democratic candidates.³¹ *The New York Times* writes that Obama managed to win groups that had voted Republican in recent years, such as voters from the suburbs and the Midwest and also parents in general, but that “hard-core” Republicans, like white evangelical Christians and others voters who described themselves as very conservative did not vote for Obama at all.³² Obama did not manage to reach the core of Republican voters, though there was a slight increase in white men voting for him, up 5% from 2004.³³ White men were as a group most steadfast when it came to resisting Democratic influence, which also is according to expected American voting behavior. White voters did not increase their support for Obama in some of the key states presented later in this chapter, like North Carolina, Indiana and Virginia.³⁴ McCain also won the majority of both white men and women.³⁵ It is debatable whether this election saw the establishment of new coalitions.

In a critical election higher voter turnout in combination with voter concern will cause cleavages in established coalitions. This implies that a sufficient number of voters will abandon their partisan loyalty and vote for the opponent’s candidate. Party reforms after 1968 made it easier for candidates to get elected in primaries without their party’s preferences.³⁶ David Lawrence claims that candidate-centered elections have emerged due to higher levels of education and the development of new media.³⁷ This will undoubtedly

³¹Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 586

³²*The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P8

³³ibid, P8

³⁴ibid, P8

³⁵*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P9

³⁶David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 22

³⁷ibid, 6

lead to more independent voters and it will also probably have a consequence for new coalitions. Lawrence's argument is that this development excludes the occurrence of critical elections according to Key's theory, since voters will be more concerned about the particular candidate's ability to solve their problems than the actual partisan identification. It also implies that new coalitions might be a consequence of the candidates' ability to reach voters, especially the independent ones. Obama carried 29% of the independent votes, which is 3% more than Kerry did in 2004.³⁸ We saw this clearly in 1980, and the same theory might be applied to the 2008 election. Obama himself, more than the Democratic Party, attracted voters just like Reagan did in 1980. While Key focused on party coalitions as the only alternative in critical elections, scholars might in the future include other criteria that will update Key's approach. Ethnicity, gender or geography might be applied in order to define critical elections in the future.

Electoral change might take place without the election being characterized as critical. A mere glance at the electorate maps from 2000 and 2004 will immediately lead to a conclusion that there were electoral changes. There are more blue states on the electoral map, and some of these states have not been red for many decades. Looking merely on the electoral map might mislead us however in to believing that some elections have been overwhelming in one or another political direction. In 1980 Ronald Reagan did carry all states but four, and got 489 electoral votes, but managed to achieve only 50.7% of the popular vote. Reagan was lucky to win previously Democratic states with only a slight majority, and still regarded his victory as a mandate, due to his huge victory in the Electoral College.

Though Obama carried states previously Republican he did not match Bill Clinton's blue victories in 1992 and 1996.³⁹ In a post-war conservative America, whose foundation was established in 1968 and further confirmed in the 1980 election, a Democrat was still capable of winning previously Republican states in those two Clinton victories. But Clinton had an advantage when it came to the South, both he and Al Gore was Border State Southerners. Between Bill Clinton and Barack Obama lie the Bush II years, with their controversies and polarizations. Clinton also changed the electoral map, but neither of his victories was considered a critical election. Like Obama, Clinton was considered an outsider and not a likely candidate when he decided to run. But unlike in the 2008 contest, the 1996 election experienced no particular voter concern or polarization within

³⁸David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 8

³⁹Milton C. Cummings, JR. & David Wise, *Democracy Under Pressure. An Introduction to the American Political System*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), inside back cover

the American society. The electorate map might seem impressive in 1992, but Clinton won with a lower percentage of the votes than Michael Dukakis in 1988,⁴⁰ very unlike Obama's victory with 52% of the popular votes. Both Clinton in 1992 and Reagan in 1980 seem to have a more significant margin on their side, making their victories and their footprint on the electoral map seem more impressive and overwhelming than it actually was.

Campaign methods might influence voters to a greater extent than before and thereby change voting behavior and cause movements in the electorate. The way modern campaigns are carried out might enable them to change the electorate. Internet and cell phones may reach more, or probably different voters than television and radio. Reaching voters is the main focus of candidates and the main way to change voting behavior and the electorate map. Campaign methods are important factors when analyzing the four states mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

A Closer Look at Four States Previously Republican

America is a presumably conservative society seen from a European point of view, and it is interesting that a liberal candidate like Barack Obama carried conservative, previously Republican states. The fact that his victory in North Carolina, Indiana, Colorado and Virginia led to a distinct change in the electoral map might be considered an important factor in analyzing the election in a critical context. A significant question is whether American society has become much more liberal or was the changes caused by voter concern, black voter turnout or by deliberate and smart campaigning, or combination of the those factors? To find an answer we have to explore the different states, look into their electoral history, explore their demography and different socio-economic factors. The statistical facts here are based on the 2000 Census. The indicators compared here are victory margins, educational level, eventual third parties, poverty rate and ethnicity.

Victory Margins and Ethnicity

Obama lost Indiana to Hillary Clinton in the primaries but won the presidential election with 49.9% of the popular vote in the state, compared to McCain's 49%.⁴¹ This indicates a very close race, but it is nevertheless up 10.7% for the Democrats since the 2004 election, while the Republicans are down 11.0%, a strong indication of a change within the

⁴⁰Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 503

⁴¹elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/indiana.html

electorate in the state of Indiana.⁴² The state was too close to call on election night due to the close race between the candidates and was in this respect not directly responsible to the outcome of the election. Some of the same circumstances apply to North Carolina. Obama won the Democratic primaries in North Carolina, but he beat McCain with only 0.3% in the Presidential election, which in numbers constitutes 14,175 votes.⁴³ In the 2000 election Bush beat Gore 56% versus 43.2%,⁴⁴ indicating a strong Republican hold of the state, even though Gore is a Southerner. Again in 2004 Bush won the state by 51% compared to Kerry's 48%,⁴⁵ a more narrow victory than in 2000, probably a sign of a growing dissatisfaction with the Republicans. Obama lost the white Appalachian part in the west of the state, but gained votes in urban and suburban counties.⁴⁶ Democrats are usually quite strong in urban areas but tend to lose voters to Republicans in suburban areas, but in North Carolina the Democrats gained votes in heavy Republican areas as well.

Like Indiana and North Carolina, Virginia might be characterized as a typical Republican state and has only gone Democratic twice after World War II, in 1948 and in 1964. Obama won the primaries in Virginia, and in the presidential election he achieved a solid victory, with his 52.6% compared to McCain's 46.3%. This differs from the close victories in North Carolina and Indiana. Bush carried Virginia with 51% in the 2004 election, down from 52.5% in the 2000 election, indicating a gradual decline in support for the Republicans. In the fourth state in this comparison, Colorado, Obama won the caucuses. The state was one of the battleground states in 2004, but was finally carried by George W. Bush. After World War II Colorado has gone Democratic twice, in 1948 and in 1964, and none of the elections was ever categorized as critical. Obama won 53.5% of the popular votes in Colorado, which was up 6.5% for the Democrats since 2004, compared to McCain's 44.9%, which is 6.8% less than in the 2004 election. Voters in Virginia waited up till seven hours to vote in some parts of the state, and in Petersburg the line of people waiting was measured to be half a mile long.⁴⁷ This was amazing considering the heavy rainfall on Election Day in many parts of the states.

While Bush won Colorado by five points in the 2004 election, Obama finished nine points ahead of McCain in 2008.⁴⁸ Compared to the three other states, Colorado has

⁴²elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/indiana.html

⁴³Gerald Pomper, *The New York Times on Critical Elections*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010), 610

⁴⁴*ibid*, 574

⁴⁵edition.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/NC

⁴⁶*The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P12

⁴⁷*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P9

⁴⁸Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 371

experienced a gradual Democratic leaning, and Obama's victory here was not as surprising as in the others states presented in this comparison. The governor is currently a Democrat, and so are both United States senators, and five of seven Congressional representatives, compared to only two of six in 2000.⁴⁹ This development shows that elements of a critical election might be present in the political history of Colorado. This thesis claims that this is probably a combination of an increase in Democratic voters, based both on a disappointment with the Bush administration, and the increase in minority groups.⁵⁰

When discussing and comparing Obama's victory in those four states it is important to explore ethnic factors, and since Obama was the first black candidate to run for President, the historic aspect of his candidacy might have had an effect on how people voted. It is interesting to explore to what extent the participation of black voters and other minorities, like Hispanics and Asians, contributed to Obama's victory in those states. The increase in black voting in the South was larger than elsewhere in America.⁵¹ Traditionally Afro-Americans in the South had participated less in elections than Afro-Americans elsewhere in the United States.⁵² In the 2008 election, in the nation as a whole, blacks matched whites, 66.1%, also before considering socio-economic factors.⁵³ Also other minority groups increased their participation in this election. Hispanics were up from 7.6 millions in 2004 to 9.7 millions in 2008.⁵⁴

Indiana is a Midwestern state with an 88.3% white population. Afro-Americans constitute 9.2% of the state's population, which is below the 12.9% average of the nation. One might allege that in Indiana black voting was therefore most probably not crucial to the outcome. A research paper conducted by Professor William H. Frey at the Institute for Social Research at the university of Michigan shows that minorities actually affected the outcome in several so-called Fast-Growing purple states in the west and the southwest. He identifies a Purple State as a state which Obama or McCain carried by 10 points margin or less. These states are mostly in the west or the southeast. He mentions especially North Carolina and Virginia in this context, but claims that also Indiana saw a considerable effect of minority voting.⁵⁵ Other sources also claims that the high black voter turnout in the state in combination with the financial crisis contributed to Obama's

⁴⁹*The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P12

⁵⁰elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/colorado.html

⁵¹www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf

⁵²www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/12/AR2010051204687_pf.html

⁵³poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/73/5/995.full

⁵⁴www.frey-demographer.org/reports/R-2009-2_HowRaceAffect2008Election.pdf

⁵⁵ibid

victory.⁵⁶ Other factors were most likely prevalent, something that will be discussed when exploring the occurrence of third parties in these four states later in this section.

In Virginia whites constitute 72.8% of the state's population, compared to 79.6% in the nation as a whole. When it comes to ethnic minorities, Virginia has more blacks than the United States as a whole, 20% of its population versus 12.9% in the nation as a whole. It is a bit less than its neighbor, North Carolina, whose population of blacks constitutes 21.6%. North Carolina and Virginia are both Southern states and therefore presumably comparable in this context. They have both gone overwhelmingly Republican in the last four decades. According to general American voting behavior one might claim that Afro-American voting has been low in these two states in previous elections. In Virginia so-called minority voting, comprising Afro-Americans, Hispanics and Asians made up for 26% of the votes in 2008, compared to 19% in 2004.⁵⁷ In North Carolina Afro-American voting was up 6.1% from earlier elections, and since almost all Afro-Americans voted for Obama, the close victory in North Carolina might be partly attributed to the active voting of the black population. In numbers blacks constitute approximately 1.8 million in North Carolina. Statistics also show that 300 000 Afro-American registrations were added in 2008, due to the intensive effort to get out the black vote in the state in the state.⁵⁸ Exit polls showed that 100% of the black women eligible to vote in North Carolina voted for Barack Obama.⁵⁹ Another aspect of Afro-American voting in North Carolina was that senator Elizabeth Dole, a Republican, was not re-elected.⁶⁰ Due to the very tight margin between Obama and McCain, only 14.175 votes, this thesis claims that it would not be too speculative to argue that high black voter turnout had an effect on the outcome in the state. An increase in the voter turnout is a criterion for a critical election, and according to Key this increase should be based on a growing voter concern. This does not exclude or underestimate the existence of extensive voter concern among blacks, but the historical aspect of black voting in the South must not be underrated. Minorities also worry about issues and politics, and were probably just as concerned about the financial crisis and the ideological direction of the nation. Though Obama presumably led a colorblind campaign his background cannot be omitted from the psychological aspect of voting. There is a huge emotional and historical aspect to Obama's victory. Most Afro-Americans undoubtedly felt that Obama was "their" candidate and they were obviously eager to see history being

⁵⁶http://www.politics.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/05/barack-obama-wins-traditionally-red-indiana_print.html

⁵⁷www.frey-demographer.org/reports/R-2009-2_HowRaceAffect2008Election.pdf

⁵⁸www.southernstudies.org/2008/11/election-2008-how-did-obama-win-nc.html

⁵⁹ *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P12

⁶⁰ *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P3

made in this election. The fact that Obama also spent several years in Indonesia in his childhood might also have been important to Asians in those states. It is an interesting question whether ethnicity might lead to a critical election, but according to this thesis that would be to extend Key's definition too far. To be able to conclude exactly on this matter one probably had to ask one and each of all ethnic voters.

Colorado is an even whiter state than Indiana, with its 89.5% white population, and with only 4.4% blacks, an indication that race was not a major obstacle for voters here when Obama ran for President. Though Colorado has few blacks compared to North Carolina and Virginia, it has increased its minority population in the recent years, and it is particularly the Hispanic part that has grown. According to Census data, the Hispanics old enough to vote increased by 18% between 2000 and 2006.⁶¹ Frey characterizes Colorado as a Fast Growing Purple State, and attributes Obama's victory here also to minority voting.⁶² According to American voting behavior minority groups like for instance Hispanics are more likely to vote for the Democrats than for the Republicans. Obama did very well among Hispanics, while McCain lost more Hispanic votes than Bush did in 2004.⁶³ Colorado differs considerably from North Carolina and Virginia when it comes to the racial aspects of voting. The Democratic leaning in the state might be a combination of its previous position as a swing state and the increase in Hispanic voters.

This analysis indicates that ethnic voting was a considerable factor in the states presented here, particularly in North Carolina and Virginia. Census data shows that those two states were among the six states in the United States with a high voter turnout.⁶⁴ This is also emphasized by the extensive increase in ethnic voting compared to the 2004 election. Ethnic voting is not a distinct criterion for critical elections, because of its evident lack of coherence with voter concern in general, but other factors have to be scrutinized before concluding on the eventual critical election in those states.

Socio-Economic Factors and Voting

Additional demographic and socio-economic factors for Indiana show that the state has fewer persons with a bachelor degree than is average in America, 19.4% compared to 24.4%.⁶⁵ The same applies to median income, inhabitants in Indiana earn slightly less than the average American, median income in the state is \$48,010 compared to \$52,029

⁶¹www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/co.htm

⁶²www.frey-demographer.org/reports/R-2009-2_HowRaceAffect2008Election.pdf

⁶³*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P9

⁶⁴www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf

⁶⁵quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18000.html

in the nation as a whole.⁶⁶ On the other hand it has fewer people below the poverty line, 12.9% of its population compared to 13.2% in the whole nation and the house ownership rate is higher, 71.4% versus 66.2%.⁶⁷ Compared to Indiana Colorado is a rather “rich” state, with 32.7% holding a bachelor’s degree and with an average income of \$57,184, well above the national average of \$52,029.⁶⁸ It also has fewer people below the poverty level, 11.2% of the population.⁶⁹ Indiana’s demography indicates a rather heterogeneous population with hard working middle or lower middle class people with traditional, conservative values. Midwestern states are supposedly more conservative than states on both the East and the West coasts, where people in general have higher education and are therefore allegedly more liberal and inclined to vote Democratic. According to the voting behavior discussed in chapter two, the average Indiana voter is probably a Republican. The Democratic victory in Indiana might therefore indicate a considerable change in the state’s electorate.

Colorado might be categorized as a solid middle class state, with prosperous suburbs and wonderful scenery. Colorado is a popular tourist destination for Americans but its income also relies on agriculture and manufacturing.⁷⁰ American voting behavior indicates that Colorado might be a typical red state. The fact that many people in the state holds a bachelor’s degree indicates more academics, a segment of the population who usually vote Democratic. The impact of the Democratic Convention in Denver on the final outcome of the presidential election is hard to tell, but it might have drawn the attention to Democratic politics. It probably also reminded Colorado of the particular historical aspect of this election, and made independent voters decide to vote for Obama. Here the psychological aspect of voting comes in. Several components seem to have been present in the Colorado voting, but the state appears to be part of the general Democratic trend that started in the midterm election of 2006. Colorado reflects a pattern that could indicate a critical election. Like Indiana, Colorado has always been a challenge for the Democrats, and Johnson’s overwhelming victory in 1964 with 61% of the popular vote in the state has never been repeated.

Virginia is considered a rather rich state, ranging above average in many socio-economic aspects. The state has a population with 29.5% of the inhabitants holding a bachelor’s degree, and with a median income far above the average, \$61,210. There are also fewer people living below the poverty rate, 10.2% versus 13.2% in the nation

⁶⁶quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18000.html

⁶⁷ibid

⁶⁸ibid

⁶⁹ibid

⁷⁰www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108189.html

as a whole.⁷¹ Virginia represents middle or upper middle class voters, living mostly in suburbs or smaller cities. This should indicate a Republican leaning, but the relatively large number of blacks should also point towards a loyalty with the Democratic Party. But since blacks usually participate less at elections than whites, this might have been to the favor of the Republican Party in previous elections. Virginia belongs to the South geographically, but it is a far more prosperous state than most other Southern states. It is a state with a versatile economy, based on income from agriculture, tobacco and fishing. Tourism and aeronautical research are also important contributors to the Virginian economy. It is hard to say whether Virginia responded to the general voter concern or that the Obama campaign's ability to get the vote out contributed to his victory. Obama might also in Virginia have benefited from high voter turnout, since 20% of the state's population is black. The closeness to Washington DC and the fact that many people commute to work for the government should indicate an inclination towards the Democratic Party.

North Carolina belongs to the South, but is very different from its neighbor Virginia. It is much poorer, with a median income of \$46,574, which is considerably lower than the US average of \$52,029. People are also less educated than in Virginia, with only 22.5% holding a bachelor's degree. The economy of the state is also reflected in the higher poverty level, 14.6%. On the other hand, house ownership is above average, 69.9% owns their own home, compared to 66.2% in the nation as a whole.⁷² According to voting behavior in chapter two, low socio-economic status often indicates a Democratic leaning, but in the South states this usually imply an inclination towards rather traditional and conservative values. White, poor people probably also vote Republican to a large extent, because in many cases, especially in rural areas, traditional, conservative values tend to have a greater impact on how people vote than the fact that these people would probably benefit more economically from voting for the Democrats. Obama won 66% of the voters in the urban areas.⁷³ But for rural, southern areas, Democratic values are often associated with liberal and leftist people of the North East.

Socio-economically, all these states are presumably Republican, but it appears to have been demographic changes in particularly Colorado. The socio-economical aspect of voting appears to have been pushed aside in favor of other criteria, like increase in ethnic voting. The way the Obama campaign was carried out is essential in concluding on how he turned these red states blue.

⁷¹quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18000.html

⁷²ibid

⁷³www.southernstudies.org/2008/11/election-2008-how-did-obama-win-nc.html

Campaigning

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Obama applied the Howard Dean-approach in his campaigning. The campaign's solid financial status enabled him to do so. Obama was the most productive fundraiser among presidential candidates ever, and in September his campaign gathered \$150 million in one month, of which 75% was raised via the Internet.⁷⁴ Obama and his numerous volunteers spent considerable time and energy in previously Republican states. Obama had more than thirty offices in Indiana, while McCain had none.⁷⁵ McCain might have considered Indiana an easy conquest since the state has been solidly Republican since 1968. Obama showed up at seven campaign events in Indiana in the last five months before the election, while McCain only appeared at two.⁷⁶ In addition to his personal visits Obama also sent his wife Michelle Obama and Joe Biden to the state.⁷⁷ But Indiana had been severely hit by the declining economy, and though McCain lead the polls in August, his lead waned as the financial crisis accelerated.⁷⁸

Exit polls in Indiana on Election Day revealed that almost 25% of the voters responded that they had been approached by the Obama campaign prior to voting, compared to only 8% for the McCain campaign.⁷⁹ Obama campaigners called voters personally, while the McCain campaign used pre-recorded calls.⁸⁰ What might seem like an insignificant detail might have proved useful and also critical to the outcome. A personal call from one of the campaigners is an important psychological approach in convincing independent or undecided voters, and so also in Indiana. In the nation as a whole twice as many voters were contacted by the Obama campaign than by the McCain campaign, and 80% of those who were contacted ended up voting for the Democratic candidate.⁸¹ One might claim that this is probably what happened in Indiana as well.

The state's demography when it comes to age population is mostly the same as the rest of the United States, as regard to the percentage of old versus young people.⁸² Like the rest of the nation Indiana had a strong voter turnout among young people, 18–29 years old, and 45% of them were contacted personally by the Obama campaign prior to the

⁷⁴*Time Commeroative Issue*, November 17, 2008, 53

⁷⁵www.politics.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/05/barack-obama-wins-traditionally-red-indiana_print.html

⁷⁶elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/indiana.html

⁷⁷www.politics.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/05/barack-obama-wins-traditionally-red-indiana_print.html

⁷⁸ibid

⁷⁹quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18000.html

⁸⁰Charles M. Madigan, *Destiny Calling: How the People Elected Barack Obama*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc, 2009), 261

⁸¹news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/us_elections_2008/7709852.stm

⁸²quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18000.html

election.⁸³ The impact of this campaign strategy is immeasurable and can of course not be verified statistically. This method gives a signal to the voters that the candidate and his organization cared about the individual voter. It might be asserted that without the high voter turnout among young people Obama would have lost Indiana.⁸⁴ The Obama campaign recruited a lot of young people to volunteer in the presidential campaign, not only in Indiana, but also throughout the United States, and this might have proved successful in two ways. First, when young people call other young people it is probably easier to get their vote, especially if they are undecided. Second, young people are often also passionate and excited campaigners, and will probably use their energy to convince both families and friends of all ages.⁸⁵ It is an interesting question whether young people were influenced by Obama's young and charismatic image and his smoothly run campaign, or if the young ones were deeply concerned as well. In the nation as a whole, 61% of the young ones between 18 and 29 listed the economy as the most important problem.⁸⁶ It is reasonable to claim that this applied to Indiana as well, especially when considering the fact that hundreds of thousands of jobs in manufacturing have been lost in Indiana since 2000, and this might have released a disappointment in the Republican way of dealing with the economy, rather than an inclination towards more liberal Democratic values.⁸⁷

In a state with a rather small black population many voters might have been skeptical to a black candidate. A charismatic candidate with eloquent rhetorical gifts like Obama might have benefited enormously from showing up in person. Experiencing him "live" could have proved as a useful psychological move in the campaign process. The impact would probably not have been the same with a Democratic candidate less charismatic than Obama. Obama also visited Indiana on Election Day, before returning to his hometown of Chicago.⁸⁸ This gave the people of Indiana a signal that their state was of utter importance in the election, making them feel that every vote counted.

Like Indiana, North Carolina was one of the states where the new Democratic campaign strategy proved successful. Obama had more than 50 field officers who organized 21,000 volunteers throughout the state, actively knocking on doors and making calls. His campaign also spent 5 million on TV ads.⁸⁹ In July 2008, *The New York Times* claimed that "Obama can write off Georgia and North Carolina", and also predicted very small

⁸³pewresearch.org/pubs/1031/young-voters-in-the-2008-election

⁸⁴ibid

⁸⁵ibid

⁸⁶ibid

⁸⁷*The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P12

⁸⁸*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P3

⁸⁹www.southernstudies.org/2008/11/election-2008-how-did-obama-win-nc.html

chances for carrying Virginia.⁹⁰ Obama choose to ignore the predictions and invested time and money in the state, just like he had done in Indiana. Obama's rally in North Carolina in the afternoon on November 3, the day before the election should not be underestimated. Obama spoke to the crowd about his beloved grandmother who passed away the same day.⁹¹ What moves voters emotionally is not an exact science, and some might have been touched by Obama's grief and his praise for his white grandmother. It also reminded the voters of Obama's white background, an important psychological factor in a previously heavy segregated state

In the same manner as in the above-mentioned states, Obama also went heavily into the state of Virginia. His campaign established 69 offices in the state, compared to John McCain's 20. The efficiency of his volunteers made them capable of "scanning" voters solely by appearance and focus on independents and probable Democrats. Some hardcore Republicans in Virginia said they had not received one single phone-call or flyer from the Obama campaign.⁹² Virginia was the last state Obama visited before returning to Chicago to wait for the results on November 4 and he faced an enormous crowd cheering him when he arrived at Manassas, a battlefield site from the Revolutionary War.⁹³ In all likelihood an important strategically and psychological move, a typical trait of Obama's well-planned campaign. Like in Indiana and North Carolina the personal appearance of the candidate so close to the election might have had a psychological impact not easy to measure. Obama showed up in twenty-five rallies in Virginia, including the primaries, signifying the importance of the state. McCain had expected to win Virginia, since he appealed to the large number of military personnel, both active and retired. But his choice of Palin as a running mate seemed to have frightened this group considered their focus on security and defense questions.⁹⁴

In comparison to Obama's personal visits to the three states above close to election day it did not help McCain that he visited Colorado on Election Day the other hand, Obama might have been lucky to rally in Pueblo, Colorado on September 15, when the Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. Obama did not miss the opportunity to include McCain's statement about the American economy in his speech in Pueblo.⁹⁵

⁹⁰www.southernstudies.org/2008/11/election-2008-how-did-obama-win-nc.html

⁹¹*The New York Times*, November 4, 2008, A21

⁹²www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/ciamerica/2008/oct/28/us-election-virginia-barack-obama

⁹³Dan Balz & Haynes Johnson *The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group 2009), 370

⁹⁴politics.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/04/barack-obama-wins-conservative-virginia_print.html

⁹⁵*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P1

This thesis concludes that the smart and focused Obama campaign contributed significantly to his victory in these states. The way campaign strategists managed to get the black vote out, and also its effort to personally approach voters who signaled ambivalence, in combination with the establishment of numerous campaign offices made McCain lag behind at an early stage.

Third Party Factor

The emergence of a third party sometimes indicates a critical election, as it did in 1968. But as mentioned earlier in the thesis third parties have also occurred in non-critical elections, and there have been critical elections without third parties as well. Another aspect of Obama's victory in Indiana and North Carolina is the appearance of a third candidate, the Libertarian candidate Bob Barr. Bob Barr was on the ballot in six states, including Virginia, Indiana and North Carolina. Mr. Barr received 29,186 votes in Indiana, which is a bit more than the difference between Obama and McCain. One might assert that without Mr. Barr, there is a hypothetical chance that McCain might have carried Indiana, since the Libertarian Party has an agenda even more to the right than the Republican Party and therefore is closer to the Republicans than the Democrats.⁹⁶ The question is to what extent voter concern contributed to Mr. Barr's votes, since many Republicans were confused and disappointed with their party's development during the Bush era. Many Republican voters also did not identify with McCain's politics; this is especially relevant when it comes to the Christian Right. *The New York Times* wrote that while the numbers for Democrats and Republicans in the electorate was 37% in 2004, 39% now identified with the Democrats, respectively 32% with the Republicans.⁹⁷ Mr. Barr, a former congressman from Georgia appears to have been the Wallace of 2008, also Barr being a Georgian, but most of all since also Wallace embraced frustrated Republican, but also Democratic voters.

In North Carolina Bob Barr achieved over 25,000 votes,⁹⁸ if, had they gone to McCain, he would have carried North Carolina as well. One must assume that there were rather few ethnic voters in North Carolina endorsing Barr. In Colorado Barr achieved 10,264 votes, not enough to make any difference if those voters had endorsed McCain. The Libertarian Party was not an essential factor in the state. The same applies to Virginia, where 11,055 people voted for Barr, and like in Colorado this was too few to make any difference.

⁹⁶ www.lp.org

⁹⁷ *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P8

⁹⁸ *USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 6A

Third party factor might have been a contributing factor in Indiana and North Carolina, but evidently, the high turnout among ethnics and young people, who also traditionally endorse the Democrats, secured Obama's victory. It was probably McCain who suffered most from the Libertarian Bob Barr. There is no evidence that third party factor had any significant consequence in the 2008 election.

Summing Up the Four States

The four states presented here differ in many ways, geographically, demographically and politically, but they also have a lot in common. Colorado appears to be more of a swing state than the three others. Since 2000 there has been a rising Democratic leaning in the state. Obama's victory in Colorado might be part of this development, and he probably secured his victory due to his eminent campaign. What characterizes these three other states are that they were exposed to the Obama campaign's agenda of making heavy efforts in previously strong Republican territory. This campaign method requires both a solid economy and also an optimistic and determined belief that people are able to change their point of view if exposed to different approaches and values in a credible way. Future candidates of both parties will probably adopt the experience of this way of campaigning, but they might not encounter the same success.

The extremely high voter turnout among black voters probably contributed to Obama's victory in North Carolina and Virginia.⁹⁹ The rise in black voting was especially distinct in the South and Obama benefited from this development in those two states. Especially North Carolina is important in this aspect, though Obama's victory in the state was by no means overwhelming; ethnic endorsement and Republicans voting for Barr evidently secured it. Obama's young and enthusiastic crew certainly did a good job to get out the vote in those states, and above all they succeeded in getting the black vote out. The historical aspect of this election must not be underestimated when it comes to the high turnout of this election, since turnout did not increase among whites. Afro-Americans might have felt that this election mattered to them more than earlier ones had done, and this was also emphasized by the fact that many Afro-Americans stood in line for hours to vote. North Carolina was never crucial to Obama's victory, but it proved to be the evidence of a successful campaign strategy with an enormous effort in getting out the black vote. The victory in the above-mentioned states might be due to voter concern, but it was also the result of an amazingly well run and smart campaign. Thousands of volunteers managed to get the vote out and inspire people to gather at rallies and thereby

⁹⁹*The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P1 & P10

giving them the notion that every vote mattered and that each individual was important to the victory. Voter concern is color blind, but the historical aspect of the 2008 election caused high black voter turnout to a larger extent than pure concern. Obama's victory in Indiana is interesting considering the overwhelming Republican victories there both in 2000 and 2004, and might be the result of the general voter concern prevalent in the American society in 2008, but it might probably most of all be contributed to Obama's way of campaigning. As mentioned earlier in this chapter one must be careful to attach an overall importance to skin color when it came to ethnic voting. Ethnic groups appear to have been just as worried about the economy as white people, but Obama's skin color in combination with his superb personal qualities might have triggered the decision to register for voting.

Obama's victory in the four states explored in this thesis proves that only Colorado showed signs of criteria for critical elections according to a strictly interpretation of Key's definitions.

Media Analysis of the Election: Great Expectations

The main primary sources all focused profoundly on the historical and emotional aspect of the election. This is an especially relevant allegation when exploring the newspapers published in the immediate week after the election. The day after the election, *The New York Times* declared **OBAMA** in inch-high bold type on their front page, emphasizing the historical and emotional magnitude of the election of the *person* Barack Hussein Obama Jr. Below his name the newspaper stated, "Racial Barrier falls in Decisive Victory".¹⁰⁰ *USA Today* wrote "America Makes History" on their front page and also quoted Obama on "Change has Come to America". Both focused on the exceptional about this election, but only *The New York Times* mentioned race, though it might be implicit in *USA Today's* headline as well. And on November 6, the newspaper proclaims on their front page: "A Dream Fulfilled", focusing on the historical aspect of the election, and describing it "Dawn of a Political Era". Their cover story two days after the elections emphasized the "never in my lifetime"-aspects conveyed to them by African-Americans interviewed by the paper. It cites Walt Whitman's "America's choosing day", and claim that Obama is the signal of a new era.¹⁰¹ The same paper's leader on this date asked, "What a black president will mean for race relations", claiming that even this election requires hard work on behalf of whites and blacks to obtain equality. Like *The New York Times* it

¹⁰⁰ *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P1

¹⁰¹ *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, 1A

stressed the psychological changes this election has brought forth. It is unclear which changes they depict, other than the election of a rather liberal, black senator to the Oval Office. *The New York Times* highlighted the racial aspect of Obama's victory as the most momentous and complimented him with his well-planned and strategic campaign. The newspaper's front page depicted the importance of a very unique president-elect. Though Obama never introduced himself solely as a black candidate, this perspective nevertheless permeates the newspaper's introduction to its coverage of the election the night before. There is a certain pride in the way the newspaper introduced the new president-elect. It did not analyze this historical event in the context of critical elections, and for more scholarly readers the newspaper communicated nothing but pure enthusiasm. But on the other hand, a thorough analysis of the election in the context of a critical election requires more than an excited front page. *The New York Times* also presented headlines like "The Changed Landscape", "For Much of the Country, a Sizable Shift" including detailed statistics of voting behavior all over the country. There is no mentioning of a possible critical election so far, but the term change seems to be the dominant notion among journalists covering the election. *Change* is a crucial factor in a critical election, but change appears to be an important factor in non-critical elections as well.

The mood is optimistic and signals the start of a new era in American political history. The perception of making history seems to appeal to both black and white, and overshadows the assumption that white people would probably not vote for black candidates.¹⁰² Both *The New York Times* and *USA Today* spoke to voters who emphasized the incredible victory by a black candidate, and said that this was something they thought would never happen in their lifetime.¹⁰³ It appears as if the historical aspect of this election is equally if not more important than the candidate's party; the expected victory by the Democratic Party is not mentioned. People who spoke to the newspapers were very emotional about the election of Barack Obama, both whites and blacks were equally proud of their country which had overcome such a racial barrier, and drew a line between Martin Luther King jr., and Obama. They also pointed out that in such hard times like the nation is facing, with a severe financial crisis, one could not afford to pay attention to prejudices.¹⁰⁴ One person acclaimed, "When your house is burning you don't look at the color of the fire fighter".¹⁰⁵ Some drew the line between the dramatic Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 and the event that took place in Grant Park after the

¹⁰² *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, P9

¹⁰³ *USA Today*, November 5, 2008, 3A

¹⁰⁴ *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P7

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, P8

results were released at 11 pm ET, November 4, 2008.¹⁰⁶

The New York Times also portrayed an all-boys school in Brooklyn, with mainly Hispanic and black students, eagerly listening to a replay of Obama's victory speech. The newspaper stated, "History Is Now and Their Future Just Changed",—and continued in the same emotional style to describe in an optimistic manner that now these children might achieve almost anything in life.¹⁰⁷ This was not the only article permeated with history, tears and strong emotions. The newspaper also spoke to civil rights veterans in Albany, Georgia who described the changes this city had gone through in the 47 years since the movement started.¹⁰⁸ *USA Today* also interviewed voters, especially in the South, with the headline, "A day of high emotions".¹⁰⁹ They visited Martin Luther King Jr.'s church in Atlanta, spoke to civil rights activists and published pictures of voters with tears on their cheeks on election night. The articles are very emotional and the paper apparently did not speak to anyone who voted for McCain. *The New York Times* also interviewed reporters who were on duty on election night, and they expressed how overwhelmed they still felt by what they had experienced the night before. Some said that this was definitely the end of the conservative era, something that might indicate that they actually were speaking of a critical election without mentioning the term itself. The contrasts between George Bush and Barack Obama were natural to consider in this context. But as asserted earlier in the thesis, the emotional aspect of electing a particular candidate might not be included in Key's definitions. That would be to extend his intentions too far.

DeWayne Wickham wrote in *USA Today* that "Blacks, whites meet at historic cross-road", stating that the main reason behind whites voting for Obama was their disappointment in the neo-conservative ideology of the Bush administration, and their belief in Obama's ability to "give them their country back". This indicates a tremendous pendulum swing, often prevalent in a critical election. He claims that also blacks were concerned with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economy, but Obama's victory also gave them the impression that "future could be now".¹¹⁰ This statement confirms what has been asserted earlier in this thesis, namely that voter concern was important, but the most important to many voters was nevertheless Obama as candidate. The newspaper further focused on the massive turnout in this election, and estimates says that

¹⁰⁶ *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P8

¹⁰⁷ *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, P7

¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, P6

¹⁰⁹ *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, 10–11A

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, 19A

62.5% voted which is the highest since 1960 (63.8%).¹¹¹ Increased voter turnout might be an indication of a critical election, though the 1960 election was never categorized as such. The newspaper also stressed the heavy registration of black voters. Black people comprised 13% of the electorate and blacks accounted for 23% of Obama's votes. But African Americans have always more or less voted Democratic, since the middle of the 1960s, though not with the same high turnout and enthusiasm as now. These findings were also prevalent in the analysis on the four states earlier in this chapter. This thesis argues that the heavy turnout among black voters helped to secure the victory. The notion of making history might contribute to higher voter turnout also among other groups and shows the psychological aspect of voting.

When it comes to the news magazines, like *Newsweek* and *Time*, one might expect to find some more analytical material, since those magazines often provide more political insight and exploration in forms of articles and comments. Fareed Zakaria, chief editor of *Newsweek International* stated: "He now has the chance to realign the national landscape and to create a new governing ideology for the West".¹¹² He thereby predicted that Obama has the chance to amend the ideological scenery, not only nationally but also on the international arena. He also cites Alexis de Tocqueville's "each generation is a new people" indicating the change that this election will probably bring to America. Implied in this is Key's mentioning of a certain cycle between critical elections. To Zakaria the election of Barack Obama is a break with the conservative past, which dominated the 1970s through the 1990s. He did not directly mention party realignment but the way he interpreted the election shows that he found it a distinct break with former politics, just like in the 1930s. Zakaria saw the election in a far more political and also ideological perspective, and left out the emotional touch. He also looked back on the 1930s and the 1960s, explaining the changes that took place in those eras, and claimed that Obama must apply the "idea of innovation" to be able to establish a new majority.¹¹³ Zakaria, who now is an editor of *Time Magazine*, has a PhD in political science and has published several works on international affairs, sees the election from another angle than many other reporters without his scholarly background. Zakaria's article touched the context of criticality when applying terms like "innovation" and "change" and by comparing this election to the 1930s and the 1960s.

Time Magazine also included several pages analyzing the electoral map, stating in its headline: "In A Decisive Victory, Obama Reshapes the Electoral Map". These pages

¹¹¹ *USA Today*, November 6, 2008, 4A

¹¹² Fareed Zakaria, "Obama Can Chart a Third Way for the West", *Newsweek*, Nov 17, 2008, 27

¹¹³ *ibid*

contained important statistics showing how the electoral map has changed since the 2004 election. Joe Klein picked up the old Kennedy slogan “Passing the Torch” in his article and claimed that Obama’s victory has the same generational aura as Kennedy’s in 1960. Like Zakaria in *Newsweek*, Klein found that Obama signals a new generation of leaders, and “an America that is still taking shape”.¹¹⁴ There was no mentioning of a critical election in the article but Klein definitely regarded this election as the start of a new era in American politics, an era “less cynical and more optimistic”.¹¹⁵ The Kennedy election also indicated a new era, and a distinct break with the past, but was no critical election.

Newsweek magazine’s articles compared Obama to both John F. Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt and particularly to Ronald Reagan. They claimed that Obama has more in common with Reagan than people are aware of, like the ability to spread enthusiasm and hope, and to be a “leader of core believers so convinced he is on their side that they are likely to forgive him his compromises”.¹¹⁶ The comparison is between *personalities*, not politics or the nature of the election. The magazine also underscored the historical aspect of the election of a man whose background, color and name many people thought might cost him the victory. They portrayed Obama as a man with enormous political gifts, a man on the right side of history, and the frontrunner for a possible new era in American politics.¹¹⁷ These reporters are not political scientists so it is natural that there was no mentioning of V.O. Key or the term critical election. As mentioned earlier, historical does not equal critical, though it might be a contribution. *Newsweek* and also *Time Magazine* attempted at a more analytical approach to the election and tried to analyze it from different views, comparing it to other significant elections, like the 1932, the 1960, the 1980 elections.¹¹⁸ But only the 1932 election has been categorized as critical, the 1960 was never labeled critical and the 1980 only partly. It was a thoroughly tendency in all the articles that the commentators included the 1960 election, an indication that this election also featured a charismatic and eloquent candidate, with an aura of hope and enthusiasm for a new generation.

The general impression is that the magazines are carried away by the special historical circumstances of this election. In *Time Magazine*, pastor and author T.D.Jakes wrote about “Crossing the Color Line”, reminiscing the black slaves that built the White House and now imagining the door to the Oval Office being opened by a dark hand. But he warned Americans and especially Afro-Americans to regard Obama solely as a black

¹¹⁴Joe Klein, “Passing the Torch”, *Time Magazine Commemorative Issue*, Nov 2008, 26–27

¹¹⁵ibid, 27

¹¹⁶Joe Meacham, *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 20

¹¹⁷*Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 38–47

¹¹⁸Joe Meacham, *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 20–24

candidate.¹¹⁹ The same magazine also made an attempt to divide presidents into particular groups instead of analyzing the election. They put Obama in the group of so-called “charismatic youngster” together with Kennedy, Clinton and Teddy Roosevelt.¹²⁰ In this way the election was examined from another angle, in line with other candidate centered elections. They also compared Obama to Woodrow Wilson, another president without much experience, and also with resembling personalities. Wilson was perceived as a president who applied an intellectual strategy when dealing with political problems.¹²¹

But another contributor to the *Newsweek* special election issue, Ellis Cose, columnist and editor, claimed: “An Epic Moment, Yes. But Transcendent? No”. He did not find the election of Obama remarkable at all, because he won the presidential election “in a year the Democrats were supposed to win”.¹²² Cose asserted that the most sensational was winning the nomination, which in itself was a major achievement considering his background, his name and his evident lack of political experience. This might indicate that Cose acknowledged that there is probably a development towards a new Democratic majority, but that the president-elect’s victory was in itself the most amazing aspect of this election. Cose’s view seems realistic and more down-to-earth than the other commentators. Contrary to Raina Kelley who called her article “A Letter to My Son on Election Night”,¹²³ trying to explain to her sleeping son what this election might mean to him in his future. From the article the reader was informed that his father is white, but that will still make him black. This was a very emotional article, and the comparison to Obama’s life was evident. It showed how personal some reporters became when describing the election. Rick Perlstein focused on former presumed ideological transformations in his article, “A New Message From Watts: Hope But Verify”.¹²⁴ Perlstein concluded that transformative change is hard to achieve, and though the 1964 election pointed towards a steady Democratic future, it undoubtedly was the start of what some call the Republican Party realignment that was confirmed in the 1968 election. This proves like a useful and realistic reminder that politics not always turn out they way one expects and predicts, and that it probably is too soon to decide on an eventual Democratic realignment. This is also in line with David Lawrence’s predictions about no actual critical elections appears to have occurred after World War II. One might argue that this claim has its root in the swift changes we often experience in politics. This was what Perlstein so soberly

¹¹⁹T.D. Jakes, *Time Commemorative Issue*, November 17, 2008, 60

¹²⁰Beverly Gage, *Time Commemorative Issue*, November 17, 2008, 97

¹²¹*ibid*, 98

¹²²Ellis Cose, “An Epic Moment, Yes, But Transcendent? No”, *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 30

¹²³Raina Kelley, “A Letter to My Son On Election Night”, *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 29

¹²⁴Rick Perlstein, “A New Message From Watts: Hope But Verify”, *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, 36–37

emphasized in his article.

The Boston Globe's web site invited five historians to an online discussion on November 9 on the significance of Obama's election to the presidency.¹²⁵ This differed from the newspapers' reactions in the way that this discussion took place among scholars and not journalists. Though the enthusiasm among the newspapers and magazine might reflect this very special election it is the analyses of scholars that have to be emphasized in this context. Opinions on the possible realignment of this election differed widely among the chosen scholars. The Boston Globe Online scholars took on a more analytical and academic approach than the journalists, and some of these scholars came close to identifying the election as critical. But almost all of them focused on the racial aspect of Obama's victory. Even though they tried to interpret the election in academic way, the emotional aspect shone through here as well.¹²⁶ Eric Foner, a professor of history at Columbia stated that the 2008 election will be viewed at as "a 21st century prototype", with its extensive use of the Internet and text messages. He also compared this election to former critical elections, like 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, 1932 and he also added 1980, and indicated that future analysts will include the Obama election in to this exclusive group. This shows that Foner assumed that the 2008 election would eventually be defined as critical. Foner saw Barack Obama's victory as the end of the Reagan era. It is interesting to notice that he included the Reagan election, an election that is still being debated in a realignment perspective by historians. It is equally interesting that he omitted the 1968 election. This conveys how he associated this election with the *candidate*, and not the party.

Steven F. Lawson, a professor of history at Rutgers, analyzed the election from a racial perspective, and focused on the possibility that Obama will be the first and the last black president, and that his victory is "the culmination of the political aspirations for the Civil Rights Movement", something that put the election in a historical, and not a critical perspective. Thomas J. Sugrue, is a Kahn professor of history and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, compared the scene in Grant Park, Chicago, to the Democratic Convention at the same place in 1968. Sugrue also characterized "Generation Obama" as very different from the hippies and the counter culture in 1968.

Jacqueline Jones is a teacher of American history at the University of Austin, Texas. She imagined herself as a historian fifty years after the election of Barack Obama to the presidency and called it a "watershed", which she tried to place in a historical perspective. She argued that scholars now agree that the election was a "transformative one in the

¹²⁵www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/11/09/what_it_meant?mode

¹²⁶ibid

context of presidential politics”, and added that they disagreed on what issues have confirmed the Democratic majority in the 21st century. She concluded that race had nothing to do with it, because the Democrats would have won in 2008 nevertheless. In this way Jones differed from the regular emotional approach applied by the newspapers and though she did not mention the term “critical” she assumed that this election will be characterized as extraordinary.

The last professor in this discussion is John Dittmer, a professor emeritus of history at DePaw University. Dittmer agreed with Ms Jones that in fifty years from now we would describe this election as a “watershed”. He focused on the link between the Obama election and the Mississippi riots in the summer of 1964, arguing that Obama’s victory represent the end of that story. Dittmer wrote that in the future we would analyze how the Obama election formed new coalitions in politics, with the young and the minority as important members. When Dittmer analyzed the election of Barack Obama fifty imaginative years from now he definitely sees a new America, with new possibilities, and an election not like any else in history.

The main sources also confirm what one might call the “enthusiasm gap” between the two candidates in this election. Those who voted for Obama were not just more worried about the economy; they were also more “excited” by the expectation that he might win.¹²⁷ It is not surprising that these primary sources did not analyze the election in a critical context; it is in the nature of media to first and foremost display the immediate reactions to the election. This does not indicate that their focus is wrong or one-sided; on the contrary, their center of attention might say something about the nature of the election, namely the election of a black president-elect. They also paid considerable attention to Obama’s personality, and the comparison with other outstanding presidents. They found Obama’s strength to be a mixture of several other presidents, like Lincoln, Kennedy, Clinton, Wilson and T. Roosevelt.¹²⁸ Only Lincoln was elected president in an election that came to be identified as critical.

Boston Globe’s online debate showed how scholars engage in the analysis of the election from the beginning, without first devoting time to research. Their approach nevertheless appeared more varied and they brought in different perspectives. It appears to this thesis that though some of these scholars touched the term critical election they nevertheless focused mostly on the historical circumstances. Here they are alongside the newspapers and magazines mentioned above. There was no direct conclusion on the criticality of this election to be found after scrutinizing the primary sources’ approach to the nature of this

¹²⁷news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/us_elections_2008/7709852.stm

¹²⁸Beverly Gage, *Time Commemorative Issue*, November 17, 2008, 98

election, though some came close. They do actually find the election most extraordinary, but the extraordinary aspects lie in the person who was elected, not the new electoral map or the high voter turnout.

The main message from the American press summing up the historical day is enthusiasm, a new start, change, a victory for what is good in America, and Obama's almost "from rags-to-riches" story that most Americans appreciate. Though the primary sources applied here signal enthusiasm and great expectations as their immediate response to the elections this does not imply that their views might be regarded as superficial and biased. There is hope, change and energy—and a pride in the crossing of the racial barrier, and a certain acknowledgment that Obama spoke of hope and change in a way Americans could resonate with. Most of all media focused on the historical aspect, finally a black man in the White House. Probably not a criterion for a critical election, but a criterion for an historical election. If these two factors are to intertwine a new approach to Key's definitions has to be applied, and future scholars might do exactly that.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study examined the 2008 presidential election in the context of critical elections, in order to figure out if this election meets the required criteria for such elections, according to the definition by V. O. Key. In a seminal essay in 1955, Key presented his theory and definition of a critical election and presented several criteria that have continued to be used in evaluations of such an election in order to qualify it as critical. In a critical election extensive voter concern and high voter turnout would eventually cause alterations in the electoral map and lead to the establishment of new political coalitions and a new governing majority. Key also indicated that a cyclic perspective appeared in critical elections in his definitions; critical elections were expected to occur within 25–40 years. Key only mentioned the elections of 1896 and 1932 as critical, but other scholars have added the elections of 1800, 1832 and 1860 as well. All these elections occurred prior to World War II, based on an assumption that critical elections require a strong partisan loyalty to fulfill the criteria. Party identification decreased steadily after World War II when parties gradually ceased to be so-called umbrella parties, covering wide aspect of American voting behavior. Since the 1970s polarization both within and between the two major parties has grown considerably. On the other hand, the rise in the public's educational level, and the development of new media also made people more skeptical towards and less dependent on the parties for their interpretations of political questions. The number of voters identifying themselves as independents gradually increased, as most American came to identify themselves ideologically to the center of politics.

This led to an extensive debate among scholars on the potential criticality of postwar elections, and some scholars, such as David Mayhew even rejects the idea of critical elections altogether. David G. Lawrence however, admits the existence of critical elections, but claims that no such elections have occurred after World War II due to the above-

mentioned decline in party identification. Arthur Paulson on the other hand, is strongly convinced that critical elections might have occurred after World War II. He emphasizes the 1968 election as an example of this, claiming that this election presents the modern kind of critical election, “realignment at the top and dealignment at the bottom”. By this he indicates that a presidential election might be characterized as critical though voters for a while continue to vote for the opposing party at state and House elections. He also asserts that not all criteria have to be present to apply the term.¹

Critical elections are often the result of a distinct political pendulum swing and to be able to understand how such elections materialize one has to explore and analyze the period prior to the election in question. Voter concern grows when the electorate’s unease with the sitting administration’s politics begins to accelerate. The controversies of the Bush era led to a profound belief among a large section of the American public that the nation was heading in a wrong direction. Eventually many Americans and also those within the Republican Party began to question the politics of the administration’s neo-conservative ideology and also the background for the invasion in Iraq, which to many people appeared to be based on false premises. The invasion in Iraq and the war against terrorism had been the main issues in the 2004 election and though these issues polarized the American public considerably, the election saw no significant changes in the electoral map. According to American voting behavior Bush benefited from the expectation that most Americans are reluctant to change commander-in-chief during wartime. This thesis asserted that with a more charismatic candidate than John Kerry, the Democrats might have carried the election.

The Democratic Party reinforced its strong hold over Congress in the 2008 election, a trend that started with the Democratic take-over of the House in the 2006 midterm election. This is something that might indicate the coming of a new governing majority, a significant trait of a critical election. On the other hand, it was most likely a reaction to the Bush era, more than a sign of a lasting Democratic trend in American politics. The 2008 primaries soon indicated that the forth-coming presidential election would be extraordinary. The Republican Party search for a “new Ronald Reagan” never materialized, and to many Republicans the choice of John McCain and Sarah Palin proved an unsatisfactory combination. The Democratic primaries lasted until June before it was decided that Obama would be his party’s candidate, something that indicated ambivalence within the Democratic Party and its voters.

The 2008 presidential election was extraordinary in many respects, but this does not

¹Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 190

in itself qualify as a critical election. The way the Obama campaign was carried out was of crucial importance to his victory, and the slogans “Change We Can Believe In” and “Yes, We Can” were applied to reflect the necessity of a new direction. The campaign’s extensive use of new media, such as the Internet, with You Tube, was an important contributor in this respect, and also text messages proved to be successful tools in reaching voters who normally do not get their information through regular newspapers or television debates. The Obama campaign, led by his eminent strategist, David Axelrod, also hired thousands of young volunteers to carry out the agenda and present Obama’s message. A tremendous effort was made to get out the vote, and many new voters were registered through the campaign. But smart campaigns and charismatic candidates are not an integrated part of Key’s definitions, which lists voter concern and a change in partisan loyalty as significant factors.

Obama stuck to his narrative throughout the campaign, and never gave in to the temptation to strike back at McCain’s allegations about socialism. He acted in a presidential manner and gave the impression of security, enthusiasm and energy. American voting behavior was described and analyzed in chapter three, and both sociological and psychological aspects of voting were dealt with there. According to established patterns of voting, white middle-aged men and suburban middle-class citizens often vote Republican while members of non-white ethnic groups, young people, academia and the urban population in general usually supports the Democrats. The thesis shows that ethnic groups like Afro-Americans and Hispanics supported Obama overwhelmingly, and so did young people and academia. Obama also got more than the normal Democratic advantage among women. This is according to expected voting behavior, though there was a slight increase in white men voting for Obama. Obama. The 2008 presidential election did not meet the criteria for new party coalitions, and whether the election saw the emergence of new voting coalitions need more scrutiny by scholars.

To be able to decide on the criticality of an election previous elections must also be explored, and the 1968 and the 1980 elections were chosen in this context. Both elections faced immense domestic and international challenges in addition to an unpopular incumbent. The 1968 election became particularly dramatic when Johnson withdrew from re-election in the primaries. The election period also showed signs of aggression and violence, an expression of disappointment and resignation, which might be described as the culmination of cultural and political processes. The nation was deeply polarized and Nixon’s victory changed the electoral map considerably when the Democrats lost the South and the political landscape changed in to a decisively conservative direction. With

regard to issues, both the 1968 and the 1980 elections had far more serious and polarizing issues than the 2008 election. These issues contributed to extensive and serious voter concern. The 1968 election also had a strong and controversial racial aspect, reflected in George Wallace's victories in the South. This thesis concludes that the 1968 election is closer to being a critical election than any other election after WWII.

Some asserts that the 1980 election also meet some of the necessary requirements for a critical election, but the findings in this thesis show that Reagan's victory was more of a confirmation of the conservative trend that started in 1968, only interrupted by Jimmy Carter's four years in office. This intermezzo by the conservative Democrat from Georgia was mostly a reaction to the failures of Richard Nixon. Reagan's charismatic personality and inspirational rhetoric contributed decisively to the Republican victory in the 1980 election, which might be described as a heavily candidate-centered election. This was exemplified by the term *Reagan Democrats*, indicating that Democrats who voted Republican in this election did so because of Ronald Reagan. These voters continued to identify themselves as Democrats, but sometimes crossed the party line for various reasons. The 1980 election has some aspects of a critical election, such as several important issues as the basis for voter concern, and a change in the electoral map, but this thesis concludes that Reagan's victory can be attributed mostly to his star image and well-run campaign. He inspired the public and promised them a new "Morning in America", something that people regarded as a necessity after a long "night" with the Carter administration.

Due to large-scale cultural and political differences the 2008 election is not comparable to elections prior to World War II. The comparisons between the 2008 election and the elections in 1968 and 1980 show that the 2008 election has more in common with the 1980 than the 1968 election. As in 1980, the 2008 election was a strongly candidate-centered election, with a charismatic and inspirational front-runner who promised a new and glorious future for America. These circumstances might also be applied to the 1960 election with Kennedy's New Frontier program, but this election lacks the voter concern and issues of the 1980 and the 2008 elections. Also Dwight D. Eisenhower's victory in 1952 might be ascribed to the popularity of a particular candidate, more than to party identification. This election changed the electorate map considerably, without ever being characterized as a critical election. The same might be asserted about Clinton's victories both in 1992 and 1996. The election of Obama appears to be part of a tradition of charismatic candidates, an aspect that of course does not exclude critical elections, but does not include them either.

Though Key never mentioned particular issues as part of his definitions, it is difficult to imagine extensive voter concern without issues. The economy was the most important issue in 2008, particularly after the financial crisis aggravated in September that year. Without the severe financial crisis that emerged after both parties had chosen their tickets in late summer of 2008, this election would most likely have been based on a confirmation or a rejection of the neo-conservative ideology of the Bush administration. According to Bush' low rating approval in 2008, it was expected that this would turn out to the Democratic Party's benefit in the coming presidential election. Clinton's campaign in 1992 also had the economy as a distinct issue, and the economy appears to have been a significant issue in many elections. The financial crisis in 2008 did not contribute to a critical election and it is also an assumption that a financial crisis will be advantageous to the party in opposition, because it signals that the politics of the party in position have failed.

As in 1980, the 2008 election also saw its "crossovers", voters leaving their traditional party loyalty to vote for the opponent, but this was not as radical a trend in 2008 as in 1980. Democrats left Jimmy Carter in 1980, as many Republicans turned down McCain in 2008, though Obama did not manage to split the Republican core voters.²

Another defining aspect is that Obama spent considerable time and resources in states that had not gone Democratic in many elections and this strategy proved to be successful. The exploration of the four previously Republican states showed that the voter turnout was particularly high among blacks and Latinos. This thesis showed that other factors in addition to serious voter concern paved the way for Obama's victory. The historically high turnout among blacks seems to have secured the victory both in North Carolina, Virginia, and partly also in Indiana. Only Colorado appeared to be a swing state with a gradual Democratic leaning that might indicate a critical election. This might be explained by voter concern, but also by the changes in demography that has taken place in the state, with the increase of Hispanic immigration in the last decade. White people did not increase their vote in this election, and the high voter turnout among non-whites might be ascribed to Obama himself more than to serious voter concern.. According to Key high voter turnout is the result of increased voter concern, and in this respect the voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election does not meet the required criterion.

The emergence of third party candidates has sometimes been a sign of a critical election, and in 1968 George Wallace acted as a transition for Democrats on their way to becoming Republicans. The 2008 election saw no significant third party, but in both

²Joe Klein, "Passing the Torch", *Time Magazine Commemorative Issue*, Nov 2008, 26

Indiana and North Carolina the conservative Libertarian Party won enough voters to prevent McCain from carrying these states.

November 4, 2008 was definitely a very special and memorable day in the political history of the United States, but it was not a day that saw the emergence of a new critical election. Witnessing history being made has above all a strong emotional aspect, and should not be underestimated as a part of voting behavior. Americans were proud to make history and to elect their first Afro-American president, a kind of “pay back-time” when previous misdeeds towards the black population could be amended. To the world Americans had an important message: Yes, we did elect George Bush, and we eventually came to admit it was a mistake, but we are also able to elect someone like Barack Hussein Obama Jr.! All over the country people took their children out of school that particular day, to see the nation making history.³ This is only one perspective that shows how hope and enthusiasm replaced voter concern. Obama was the evidence the nation needed to prove that everything is possible in America; that this is not just an empty claim. On November 4, 2008 America was able to see beyond race, family name and upbringing. It indicated a significant development in the nation’s approach to racial problems and its dark history of segregation and suppression. This aspect was also heavily emphasized by the primary sources applied in this thesis. There was an overall enthusiasm and relief displayed in their coverage of the election of Barack Obama, but one might argue that this reflected the fact that Obama had obviously been the media’s favorite throughout the election. Media was permeated with emotions, hope and enthusiasm. Some scholars did in fact try to put the election in a wider perspective, like the Boston Globe Online’s scholars, but enthusiasm nevertheless overshadows the analytical approach. In years to come scholars will probably analyze this presidential election in a critical context with a more distanced view than in the immediate days after the election.

The 2008 presidential election does have certain aspects of being a critical election, such as heightened voter concern and a high voter turnout. In addition the Democratic Party enforced its majority in Congress. There was also a change in the electoral map since many solidly red states turned blue. But this thesis shows that some of these states changed their electoral color due to increased voter turnout among non-whites, and in addition Obama’s victory was too close to call in both Indiana and North Carolina on election night. A high turnout among first time voters might signal a generational change based on the assumption that critical elections emerges within 25–40 years cycles. But it might also be attributed to Obama’s ability to attract young people both to vote for him

³Nancy Gibbs, *TIME Commemorative Issue*, November 8, 2008, 34

and to work for him as voluntary campaign workers. The fact that so many young people devoted time and energy to get Obama elected might have influenced young voters in general. To young people Obama represented the future, he was perceived as a different kind of politician. The political timing seems to have been just right for a politician like Barack Obama Jr. His charismatic character and the enormous political and eloquent speech gifts in combination with his ability to inspire thousand of people to work for him, and eventually to vote for him are more determining to his victory than to the traditional criteria for critical elections. Like Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama is a once-in-a-lifetime candidate, with a unique background and an important message for hope and change. He is above all the evidence that even for black people the American Dream might come true, and that the allegation that everything is possible in American proved credible to the rest of the world. The fact that Obama himself claimed to run a colorblind campaign cannot be disregarded in this interpretation, but it is evident that there was a strong racial aspect about his victory. It is also debatable whether the election saw the establishment of many new coalitions since groups that usually vote Democratic, like minorities, young people and academia, did so in this election as well. Obama did not succeed in convincing white men and conservative Republicans. One might argue that the 2008 presidential election might qualify as a mini-critical election, due to the fulfillment of some of the criteria. But it is uncertain that critical elections based on a strict interpretation of Key's definitions will continue to occur in American political history. This thesis asserts that the last was probably in 1968, with the 1980 and the 2008 elections as possible hybrids. Future scholars might come to redefine the conceptualization of critical elections so that modern elections will meet eventual new criteria. With a declining party loyalty other aspects might come to dominate the interpretations of critical elections.

Public opinion in the United States treasures the idea of being a young nation with a revolutionary history, but it also sometimes exhibits violent political expressions and unexpected, often dramatic elections. Such dramas occasionally develop into critical elections, as it did in 1968, and partly in 1980. But the United States is also a nation that highly admires and celebrates politicians that are able to inspire hope and change when the future looks gloomy and futile. In this way candidates for the presidency express fundamental American values and traditions because hope and change were exactly what the founding groups of European settlers in what became the United States are remembered for. Americans have an inherently strong belief in the claim that the United States is a place where everything is possible and where anyone might become president. America honors those who fight for and believe in the nation's ability to rise again after a depress-

ing period. Obama embraced this ideology in his victory speech at Grant Park, Chicago, and claimed that “if there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”

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