

Obama sparking civic awakening of American youth

By Han Park | | Story updated at 6:30 PM on Tuesday, May 20, 2008

One of the great things happening in this year's Democratic presidential primaries is the encouraging reality that countless new voters are being energized. Record numbers of young voters, ages 18-24, are participating in the electoral process, and a great majority of them are supporting Sen. Barack Obama.

According to CNN exit polls in the primary states, practically every state - even those the senator fails to win - reflect this trend: In Georgia, for instance, 81 percent of voters age 18-24 cast ballots for Obama. In Wisconsin, it was 79 percent; Utah, 70 percent; Missouri, 69 percent; Alabama, 66 percent; Illinois, South Carolina and Pennsylvania, 65 percent; Louisiana, 66 percent; Tennessee, 56 percent; and New York, 55 percent.

In campaign rallies across many college campuses, students are flocking to hear Obama, and many of them are more actively involved as organizers. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the Vietnam War years when students filled campuses to stage anti-war demonstrations; this time, however, it is not limited to a single issue.

How can this phenomenon be explained? Many attribute it to Obama's personal charm. While there is no denying this remarkable man displays an uncompromising stance on principles and moral standards, the substance of his message is overwhelming.

Speaking to a random sample of college students at the University of Georgia and elsewhere, I sense that the single most appealing message of Obama's is, undoubtedly, that of change. Not just any kind of change, but the kind of fundamental change implied in his use of phrases such as "turning the page" or "writing a new chapter of American history." This suggests to me that the young people, especially educated ones, are simply fed up with the status quo. Like many other voters, young people are deeply frustrated and distressed by conventional politics and are ready to vehemently reject age-old politics as usual.

Enthusiasm among young voters underscores an anger toward an establishment in which their futures are robbed by greedy politicians and economic elites whose appetites for enriching themselves at the expense of all others are unbounded. The runaway national deficit mortgages their future; their jobs are outsourced freely for the single motive of profiteering; many, including their own friends and classmates, are senselessly killed in a war that never has been legitimized. Their intellect is insulted by the Bush administration's flawed logic, in which fear is used to oppress democracy and human dignity. Anti-American sentiment is so pervasive they find it unsafe to travel abroad, and their government's refusal to talk to its enemies has made the world far less safe. The "war on terror" drains our national wealth without an end in sight, while global warming and other forms of environmental deterioration threaten the very survival of mankind. And in all this, young people are lied to, or at best, ignored.

When the junior senator from Illinois, an unconventional presidential hopeful, emerged from obscurity with the simple decree that "the time has come for change," the helplessly dislocated

and alienated youth of America responded. The young people, the intelligent people, the people with common sense and decency who are our country's future, are finally waking up. I call it the great civic awakening.

Young people demand the kind of change that reflects a total overhaul of the body politic, a reshuffling of priorities, a remolding of the politicians' mindset and a restoring of a true democracy in which the government is by and for the grassroots people, not the privileged. The young people are driven to the belief that such a fundamental change will reinvigorate America's heartbeat and help it reclaim its admirable standing in the world.

Democracy in America is at a low point, corrupted by a mindset in which wealth may be obtained at any cost; that domination over others is the only way of establishing an orderly society; that some in the world are inherently evil and must be destroyed; that what matters is "now" and the future is irrelevant. Most of all, ordinary people are marginalized in politics. Politics is brokered by a select few in established circles, for their own interests. The field of political gamesmanship is hidden behind a veil, leaving citizens disenfranchised.

This rallying of young people around aspirations for real change has incited a movement. Though the movement encompasses more than Obama alone, his role was pivotal in inspiring and sparking this transformation. When he urges young crowds to work together in the challenge of remaking America, they show the resolve to meet the challenge. This movement is also greater than the election. It may well be the beginning of a genuine process of social and political engineering.

This great civic awakening is long overdue. It is a blessing for America that its young people are rising to the occasion and claiming their rightful place in democratic politics. America has the fateful responsibility to value and help these motivated young people prepare themselves to make a difference - in this troubled nation of ours and beyond.

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