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Obama Abroad and In the Minds of American Voters

LSE Ideas

By Robert Kelley

The word is out: US presidential candidate Barack Obama scored a resounding victory with his recent eight-nation swing through the Middle East and Europe. With every stop, a remarkable media buzz and scores of well-timed, dignified images poured into the global political consciousness. It even seemed that for a short time, the world could regale in a US presidential campaign appearing to court a riveted (albeit non-voting) foreign public. In Afghanistan and the Middle East embattled leaders embraced Obama, understanding he may one day hold their respective fates in his hands. Obama struck the rights chords by promising more help in Afghanistan, more sovereignty to Iraq, and undiminished support for Israel. In Europe, Obamamania soared as he skipped across the continent, one day a public blitz in Berlin, another in Paris for a coup of statecraft, and concluding in London with grand day out.

For those who weren't aboard "O-Force One" drenched in the festivities the commentaries remained notably sanguine, even by conservative estimates. The Christian Science Monitor conceded "there is little doubt that in taking the eight-nation tour, Obama has altered the calculus of the presidential race." The Economist acknowledged Obama's tour went off "better than he could have dared hope." But with so many correspondents and news anchors on this junket, few were left behind to report on John McCain's muted claims of media bias, or expand on the quite legitimate complaint that Obama's overseas adventures meant eschewing, for a time, his responsibilities to voters back home.

Undoubtedly, if Europeans could weigh in on this election the outcome would be long since decided by now. A recent YouGov/Daily Telegraph poll showed respondents in Britain, Italy, France, Germany and Russia preferring Obama by an average margin of nearly 5 to 1. Predictably, these figures carry no truck with Americans. In fact, under certain circumstances such an outpouring of affection from foreign constituencies (and Europeans in particular) only serve to raise suspicions that inevitably produce the opposite effect. During the 2004 US election, George W. Bush exploited the rumor that his opponent, John Kerry, was preferred by European leaders. He chided Kerry for indulging European opinions, in effect raising nagging questions about his opponent's allegiances, and summarily reaffirmed in many voters' minds the correctness of his administration's security policy.

As Obama savors his glorious receptions abroad, a lingering question returns: do Americans pay any mind to international views of their election? One piece of evidence at this time suggests they might be coming around: the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported in June that 56 per cent of Americans see its lowered respect from abroad as a major problem, up from 48 per cent in 2006. It has not gone unnoticed, either, that recent policy shifts opening the way to engagement with Iran and withdrawal from Iraq echo Obama's calls to reconcile with America's international partners. Bear in mind, of course, that it is foolhardy to believe Americans will openly seek suggestions from outsiders on how they should vote in November, especially as domestic issues command greater attention.

Still, one cannot help but wonder how this increased concern will play out in the coming election and beyond. As far as this question of whether Americans care is concerned, it is hard for them to discount the high confidence among foreign audiences in Obama to do the right thing in matters dealing with foreign affairs. How much does this confidence matter? If history provides any clues, some may exist in the correlation between a president's popularity at home as opposed to abroad. Although pollsters have only recently begun to chart foreign popularity of the US president, it is safe to say those who completed their terms in office with approval ratings over 60 per cent (Clinton, Reagan, Kennedy, and Eisenhower) enjoyed some measure of popularity abroad. It seems highly unlikely given the options that any president in the era of approval ratings could achieve overseas popularity while suffering from low approval ratings at home.

Americans justifiably question the foreign policy for the inexperienced first-term senator, but with his intentions for rapprochement with Europe made clear this past week excited Europeans are banking on hopes that Americans will see their fortunes as unified with those of the rest of the world, and realize that choosing the US president affects populations beyond its borders. Foreign enthusiasm over Obama is fueled by speculation that America may at last be tiring of the often contentious

stewardship of George W. Bush and furthermore desire a more genial global leadership style to offset the more sobering aspects of its enormous power. It remains to be seen whether such enthusiasm and anticipation will be enough to tilt the balance in Obama's favor.

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