

America's 2008 Presidential Election

An Analysis of the *Le Monde* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Newspapers

Introduction

Throughout 2008, the US presidential campaign dominated not only American's press: its European counterparts likewise devoted close attention to this particularly fascinating spectacle. Barack Obama, enjoying sweeping support throughout Europe and making stopovers there during his campaign, basked in the spotlight of its media.

In the following, we shall explore how France and Germany, two key US allies, portrayed Barack Obama's final campaign days and subsequent victory on November 4, 2008.

For the time span of November 1 – 30, 2008, our focus will be on France's major newspaper *Le Monde* and Germany's leading newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). As France's most widely read paper, *Le Monde* reaches 1.89 million readers a day – while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's largest daily newspaper, attracts 1.54 million readers per day. Both publications have three foreign correspondents in the United States and are center-left oriented.

Obama in France's *Le Monde*

What is perhaps most striking in *Le Monde*'s analysis of Barack Obama's election is that his strategy is repeatedly described as a model for France's political parties and its upcoming 2012 presidential election.

The Sarkozy communication team plans to create an Obama-like online community network for the UMP (*Union Pour Un Mouvement Populaire*) that should boost Sarkozy's reelection prospects. According to Christophe Lambert, UMP strategy team member, both Obama and Sarkozy understand that politics needs to be turned into a show.

Le Monde scrutinized French politicians' dreams of importing Obama's methods, professional organization and meticulously planned public appearances. In 2012, the UMP aims to implement the "ultraprofessionalism" of Obama rallies, where nothing can ever be too planned.¹ The UMP hopes to organize a major event like the Democratic Convention that

spans several days. However, there are limits to copying American campaign strategies: commercials of any kind for presidential candidates are illegal in France and financing is much more restrictive. Sarkozy's advisors now hope to soften some of these laws. What French politics also lacks compared to the US – according to *Le Monde* – is openness to emotions. Emotions, family and drama are vital for fully shaping a candidate's "brand" and corresponding logo, typography, slogans, positions and values.²

The PS (*Parti Socialiste*) also wants to apply Obama as an example and wonders where their Obama-like leaders are.³ PS politicians portray Obama, a Democrat, as the "anti-Sarkozy."⁴

A further prominent topic in *Le Monde's* analysis of Obama's election is the question of race and integration in politics. The newspaper points out that French political parties such as the PS shy away from having Arab or black candidates, on the notion that the "French aren't ready" to embrace this. For the PS, the gap between the *banlieue* population and politicians seems insurmountable – yet Obama's victory proved them wrong. Nevertheless, according to *Le Monde*, it may be too early for France – with no black major-city mayors – to elect a black presidential candidate.

As *Le Monde* further points out, the UMP views Obama's success as mainly due to his own merit. As UMP secretary general Patrick Devedjian declares, those who feel penalized by foreign origins should strive to find their place in society, even if this is difficult. *Le Monde* also notes that Obama is not a supporter of "positive discrimination."⁵

Obama in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

The German newspaper mainly focuses on how Barack Obama's election opens up prospects of renewing German-American relations. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (*SZ*), Foreign Minister Steinmeier supports Obama's Middle East policy and Chancellor Angela Merkel hopes to cooperate with the 44th US President in a "spirit of community." The *SZ* emphasizes that, in the age of globalization, major challenges like the financial crisis, climate change or terrorism can only be overcome by international cooperation.⁶

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* comments that Germans are again allowed to "love" the United States, and politicians like Joschka Fischer (former foreign minister) publicly praise Obama's vision, rhetorical skills and humble recognition of the burden he accepted. Germans seem relieved about the German-American friendship's renewal and embrace an anticipated decline in anti-Americanism.⁷

Concerning the question of race, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* focuses on contrasting perceptions of a multicultural society on the two sides of the Atlantic. While the US views ethnic diversity as a chance and a dream (as illustrated by Obama's election) that advances American cultural evolution, German political leaders frequently focus exclusively on Germany's failure to integrate immigrants, rather than truly aiming toward a multicultural society. According to the *SZ*, politics and dreams do not seem compatible in Germany, and integration is often considered merely a bureaucratic process. The German newspaper further characterizes reactions to Obama's election as revealing once more that Germany still hasn't learned to be open toward foreignness or to let the country change and evolve through integration.⁸

Comparison of *Le Monde* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

The most striking difference between *Le Monde's* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* coverage is the French paper's focus on adapting Obama's campaign strategy (including his professionalism, online/offline networks, grassroots movement and financing) to France's PS and UMP parties, and particularly to Sarkozy's reelection campaign – while the German publication ignores the applicability of Obama's strategy to Germany's political parties.

Moreover, there seems to be a French desire for an Obama-like politician and *Le Monde* readers encounter both admiration and envy of America's new president throughout the reportage. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in contrast, emphasizes possibilities for renewing German-American friendship and cooperation, though acknowledging that Germans do seem to identify with America's new leader.

The issue of race and origin in politics is addressed by both papers – from different angles: while *Le Monde* dwells on problems in integrating people of foreign origins into the political world, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concentrates on Germany's incapacity and unwillingness to truly integrate foreign cultures into their own.

One may identify several reasons for the differing approaches.

First, there is a historical explanation based on the fundamentally different relationships France and Germany have with the US: France has always considered itself more a rival than a simple ally of America. Without needing to evoke the French political model's pretension of universality via the French Revolution or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen⁹, it can be said that France's political and ideological position toward the US has been characterized by refusal of alignment with the American model ever since 1945, under the

impact of Charles de Gaulle. In fact, France has tried more or less openly to eternalize its role as a major diplomatic power on the international stage by defending its conception of human rights. The Bush Administration's policies offered great opportunities in that regard. However, enthusiasm for Barack Obama's candidacy and election may be partly interpreted as disillusionment by the French, who once considered their country worthy of exporting political models. Is it not across the Atlantic that one now discovers a new approach to politics? While French enthusiasm for Obama's victory is certainly sincere, *Le Monde's* articles also remind France yet again of its (humiliating) "degradation" to a second-rate power.

In contrast, Germany's relationship with the US since the end of World War II and the Cold War, has been based on gratefulness and cooperation rather than rivalry. The anti-Americanism created during Bush's presidency was a phenomenon previously unknown to modern Germans and caused them discomfort, as it opposed their fundamental conception of America. This may explain why Germany welcomed Barack Obama's election with relief, for it is now able to reengage its pro-American stance. Germany had always supported America's foreign policy up to George W. Bush's administration; in fact, some claim that until Germany's opposition to the 2003 Iraq war, it did not have a true (military) foreign policy of its own. Also, German society has a fondness for American culture, encouraged by the "Amerikahäuser" (American cultural centers established in Germany after WWII), as well as through American soldiers stationed in West Germany. More receptive to American values and with a predominantly positive image of the US until Bush's election, German society is more "Americanized" than France. For decades, France has exhibited bouts of diffuse anti-Americanism on both sides of the political aisle, as illustrated by the "exception culturelle française"¹⁰. Hence, French society's relationship toward the US is more ambivalent than that of Germany.

A further reason for differing approaches by *Le Monde* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* relates to Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy themselves: Sarkozy was accused of "Americanizing" his presidential campaign as he transformed the political process into a show. In playing with the media and using it as a campaign tool, he presented himself as a media happening, an approach largely inspired by America's spin doctors. This may explain the eagerness of Sarkozy and the UMP (as well as the PS) to copy Obama's strategy – it may fit well into their own conception of presidential campaigns. Furthermore, personification of France's president, reinforced by the new five-year term, is much higher than that for the German

chancellor, which is not a directly elected post. Merkel's campaign approach is rather conservative. She came to power not due to her image or media prowess, but rather because of her role as leader of her party. Also, being more a background player, her personality is a key aspect of why she avoided the American way of campaigning. Germany's September 2009 elections will provide ample opportunity to see whether Obama's success impacts the candidates' image and media use in that country.

Concerning the race issue, a historical explanation yet again exists for the differing coverage in *Le Monde* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: Like the US, France considers itself a country of immigration that evolves by integrating foreign cultures. However, unlike the American *salad bowl*, France has tried to integrate immigrants through institutions, e.g. schools and the armed forces (until military conscription was replaced by a professional army in 1996). Thus, it sought to integrate the newly arrived into its culture and provide possibilities for climbing up the social ladder. While France continues struggling to create a truly ethnically diverse and just society (especially in terms of representation in government, the media and the "elite" in general) and created a minister for the "Promotion de l'égalité des chances" (promotion of equal opportunities) in 2005, it is the US that elected a black president with an Arab-sounding name. Obama's victory constitutes great hope for America's melting pot society, which is also one of Obama's key messages ("We are one nation!"¹¹). Again, according to *Le Monde*, this election is seen as an example for France to follow in terms of equal professional opportunities, yet also highlights the failure of France's integration model.

Germany, in contrast, considers itself as characterized more by emigration than immigration. Its first major wave of 20th century immigrants were the so-called "Gastarbeiter" of the 1960s and 1970s, temporary laborers required to return to their home country once the work was finished. However, many stayed and brought their families to live with them. During the past 15 years, a debate has arisen concerning Germany's status as an immigration country: the role of foreign residents and the need to impose a "Leitkultur" are being discussed. The main question for German politicians usually lies with how to "make" Germans out of foreigners. As one *Süddeutsche Zeitung* article pointed out, American society is the sum of all dreams of people from different ethnic origins, whereas Germany society aims to "produce" Germans out of foreign immigrants through bureaucratic processes. Obama's election thus underscores once more the fundamentally differing perceptions of the role of immigrants in the US and in Germany. As Germany's enthusiasm for Obama's election has revealed, it may embrace and be ready for a new approach toward integrating immigrants into its society.



In summary, coverage of America's 2008 election by the French and German press reveals not only differences between the two European countries and the US, but also between France and Germany itself. While these largely historically based discrepancies remain, it can be said that France and Germany have come closer to another in the sense that they both embraced Obama's election with enthusiasm. Generating envy and admiration, the results of November 4, 2008, may also have brought a sense of "change" and progress to both France and Germany.

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¹ « Le phénomène Obama, un exemple pour les partis politiques français », *Le Monde*, November 6, 2008.

² « La campagne de M. Obama inspire les conseillers de M. Sarkozy », *Le Monde*, November 5, 2008.

³ « Le phénomène Obama, un exemple pour les partis politiques français », *Le Monde*, November 6, 2008.

⁴ « Barack Obama, la nouvelle icône des politiques », *Le Monde*, 8 novembre 2008.

⁵ « L'élection d'Obama donne un coup de vieux à la politique française », *Le Monde*, November 7, 2008.

⁶ « Hoffen auf den Neuanfang ; Steinmeier reist in den Irak – als Geste an Obama », *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 10, 2008.

⁷ Weidinger, Birgit, « Die rot-grünen Jahre ; Joschka Fischer spricht über sich und den Hoffnungsträger Barack Obama », *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 6, 2008.

⁸ Diez, Georg, « Ein großer Schritt ; Nach Obama : Ist Integration ein Traum ? Oder viel Arbeit ? », *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 10, 2008.

⁹ As discussed by Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*

¹⁰ Policy to protect French culture from Americanization, e.g. via quotas for French productions in movie theatres, TV and radio

¹¹ Obama, Barack, Democratic National Convention 2004, Keynote Address, July 24, 2004.