

A New President for Urban America

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Presidential elections, and in many respects presidents in general, are usually a little distant for those of us who live in big cities. The presidential election season begins with rural images from Iowa and New Hampshire and end with two candidates scrambling for votes everywhere across the country -- everywhere except for New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco, Houston and most of the other big cities which are not located in swing states. Cities such as Cleveland, Miami and Philadelphia are, of course, exceptions to this.

During the campaign one party usually makes nasty comments about cities and city dwellers suggesting, or in the case of Sarah Palin simply saying, that we are not real Americans. The other party generally treats us like a slightly embarrassing guest at a dinner party who might offend the other guests at any minute, but who is tolerated because he pays most of the bill at the end of the evening. Some of the issues that are important to city dwellers, mass transportation costs and maintenance, rent control, park space are simply ignored while others such as crime and welfare are vehicles for grandstanding, often by candidates from both parties.

Most presidential candidates, and most recent presidents, have had little understanding or experience of big American cities. President Kennedy had represented part of Boston in the House of Representatives for two terms, but no president since Kennedy has had political or personal roots in urban America. Many of our presidents since Kennedy had spent very little time at all in big cities until they were well known politicians. It is unlikely that before they each became president, Richard Nixon spent much time waiting for a subway, George W. Bush played softball in an urban park or Jimmy Carter walked through many urban housing projects.

President Obama is, of course, different. There are many bigger stories surrounding Obama's election and presidency, but it is also worth remembering that he is our first big city president in well over a generation. Obama has deep roots in urban America and represented part of Chicago in the Illinois state senate. The import of this should not be overlooked. A few years ago, the bias in national politics against big cities was sufficiently strong that a former state senator from Chicago would have been viewed as not having much of a chance of being elected president, even if he were not an African American with an unusual name.

There are a range of issues, some new and some old, which have particular impact on big cities. The essential urban issues of quality public education, safe streets and job development remain central for all big city residents. If, as seems to be the case, President Obama is going to work for investment in our infrastructure, it is likely that his administration will be more sensitive to the needs of urban Americans with regards to infrastructure in areas such as public parks, public transportation and the like. Moreover, Obama is better positioned to bring sensitivity and awareness, and equally significantly, an appreciation, of some of these issues than any other recent president.

President Obama can also identify with and build upon some of the ways that cities should be models for America in a way that his non-urban predecessors never have. As we, for example, seek to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, it is worth recognizing and seeking to replicate the lifestyles of many urban Americans who drive less, live in smaller homes, water their lawns less, walk more and use public transportation more than their fellow Americans.

Equally importantly, President Obama can begin to change the national dialog about how we talk about cities. During the course of Obama's campaign, we saw numerous attempts to suggest that Obama was somehow prima facie corrupt because of his Chicago roots. The extent to which not only the media, but members of both parties let this stand was remarkable. Imagine the media outrage we would have seen if northern politicians had made similar remarks about a presidential candidate from Mississippi, Alabama or any of the other southern states where it was not that long ago where far more serious assaults on our democracy occurred than anything we have seen in recent years in Chicago. Additionally, anybody who picks up a newspaper or surfs the internet can see that cities, and city politicians, have no monopoly on corruption, but somehow these criticisms of Chicago, and our cities, were allowed to stand.

It should go without saying, but I will say it anyway, that the problems facing big American cities will not go away because of Obama's election; and the current economic condition will continue to hit our cities very hard. However, an Obama presidency is an opportunity for our political leadership, of both parties, to stop denigrating big cities, and ignoring the positive role they play in our political life, and to begin to recognize the contributions cities can make to solving the problems we all face.