



Editorials

Obama's victory

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What are the implications for global health?

The world looked on in anticipation as a new American president was elected on 4 November 2008. Discussion in American health policy circles focused on the question of how the next president might reform the American health system.¹ However, the rest of the world will be more concerned about the implications for global health. This is something that demands urgent attention because the first 100 days of the new administration can be expected to set the tone for the rest of the presidential term.

From what can be glimpsed so far, the election of Barack Obama seems to have four major implications for health worldwide. The first relates to assistance in international development. Obama has called for a substantial increase in development aid. He would like to increase funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) by \$1bn (£0.6bn; €0.7bn) over five years and double overall foreign assistance to \$50bn a year by 2012.² He has also advocated greater US support for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and for the UN Millennium Development Goals, and he has called for 100% debt cancellation for the world's heavily indebted poor countries.² These are ambitious goals in the current financial crisis, and resources would have to be diverted from elsewhere.

In the short term the greatest change may therefore be the ideological direction of US foreign assistance. The Bush administration blocked funds for needle or syringe exchange programmes, undermining HIV prevention efforts in countries with epidemics driven by injections.³ Similarly, an emphasis on abstinence only approaches to the prevention of HIV obstructed efforts in areas where the epidemic is driven by sexual contact.⁴ These policies are likely to be abandoned, but what is less clear, so far, is whether greater emphasis will be given to strengthening health systems rather than narrowly investing in vertical structures, such as those for HIV.⁵

The second major implication for global health concerns US foreign policy. Since 2001 the United States has pursued a highly controversial "war against terror." Although the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan was welcomed by many, the invasion of Iraq has greatly damaged the global reputation of the US. The human cost, borne largely by Iraqis, has been enormous,⁶ and the US will be paying the financial costs for decades.⁷ Obama's administration will continue to prioritise American interests but, given his vocal opposition to the war in Iraq and his commitment to the use of diplomacy and to bridge

building with Europe, he may be in no rush to launch further military adventures, especially where European support is lacking.

The third implication is for American science. The Bush administration sought to impose its own ideology on science, restricting the subjects that could be researched with federal funds, using evidence selectively, and barring researchers whose findings challenged the ideology of advisory committees.⁸ The US is a major producer of knowledge, both in primary research and the influential syntheses conducted by federal agencies. The new administration is likely to move quickly to restore the credibility of its science related policies—for example, by supporting the work of the Fogarty International Center.

The fourth and by far the most important implication for the rest of the world is the adoption of a new position on climate change, now recognised as a major threat to health.⁹ The Bush administration only reluctantly, and very belatedly, accepted that climate change was the result of human activity,¹⁰ and it greatly undermined global efforts to reduce carbon emissions. In contrast, Obama has advocated aggressive targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions, envisaging a return to 1990 values by 2020 and a further 80% reduction by 2050.¹¹ The US is likely to ratify the Kyoto Protocol or its successor, which will give new impetus to policies on climate change within the United Nations.

Ultimately, all these changes point to a willingness to engage positively with the rest of the world, rather than pursuing a policy of American “exceptionalism.”¹² As the current financial crisis has reminded us, people everywhere are affected by the policies of the US. The prospects so far seem positive, but much will depend on whether Congress will approve Obama's policies.

America is changing, but the rest of the world must change too. It is easy to feel overwhelmed when confronted with the scale of today's global health challenges. Yet collective action is now possible on a much wider range of issues, from reproductive health to climate change. Many political leaders will meet in July 2009 in Italy at the G8 summit, where health will be on the agenda. This will be an opportunity to learn whether together they will rise to the challenge.

Notes

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Footnotes

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