

POINT OF VIEW

If The World Could Vote

By Kishore Mahbubani | NEWSWEEK

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The U.S. Presidential election may be the most undemocratic in the world. Only some 126 million Americans vote, yet the result is felt by 6.6 billion people. Indeed, in some ways it matters even more to non-Americans. The president is constrained domestically by many constitutional checks and balances, but this is far less true in foreign affairs.

Nevertheless, the world has yet to pick its favorite. It is clear, however, whose election would have the most dramatic effect: Barack Obama's. In one fell swoop, an Obama victory would eliminate at least half the massive anti-Americanism now felt around the world. Eight hundred million Africans would get a tremendous boost to their self-esteem and cultural pride. A son of their soil would, for the first time, occupy the White House, and many would whisper, approvingly, "Only in America."

Obama is not a Muslim, but the 1.2 billion Muslims around the world would take great interest in his middle name: Hussein. Indeed, the election of "H" would immediately undo much of the damage "W" has wrought. We pushed hard for the democratization of the Islamic world, but H's election would accomplish far more. Young Muslims would quickly start asking why America can elect a young Hussein when their own states are stuck with aging, visionless leaders. Obama has said that "the United States is seen as arrogant and aloof" and that "the world will work with—not against—U.S. power if it is put to principled use and directed towards common goals." Were he to implement this thinking as president, the world would become a much happier place.



Of course, not everyone would be overjoyed. The Europeans would be the most cynical. For ages, they've believed that the world pays the price for American inexperience, and many would thus rather Hillary Clinton become president (and they'd be happy to accept Bill as part of the package). She is careful, cold and calculating; Europeans like that. She would also

be well received by Latin Americans, who still love Bill and who would note the interesting parallel with Argentina and the Kirchners.

It is harder to anticipate the reactions of the new rising powers: China and India. For both states the stakes are high, since the United States can facilitate (or hinder) their return to great-power status. It's no wonder that both have long since developed a sophisticated feel for the U.S. electoral process. Way back in 1972, Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai received a young Oxford student, Benazir Bhutto, in Beijing. Zhou, the lifelong Marxist, asked the Westernized Bhutto about the McGovern-Nixon race. She confidently predicted a McGovern victory. Zhou replied by giving a comprehensive, state-by-state analysis that proved Nixon would win. He was dead right, of course.

For different reasons, both China and India have come to appreciate the virtues of Republican presidents, who tend to be more predictable. Republicans also traditionally favor realism in geopolitics and support free trade. Bush may be unpopular in America, but he is beloved in India, more so even than Bill Clinton. This is owing to the U.S.-India nuclear deal, a powerful gift that legitimizes New Delhi's nuclear and great-power status.

That said, China and India are unlikely to favor the current Republican front runners. Their quiet preference may be for John McCain, who is by far the most experienced, is widely traveled and knows the world well. McCain's foreign-policy advisers are also decidedly centrist. It will be a surprise if he wins, but he will not pull any surprises if he does.

Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney, on the other hand, hold unknown views. And the world may not be ready for a Southern preacher. As for Rudy Giuliani, his relentless focus on 9/11 and his preoccupation with the dangers of the world show him to be frighteningly out of touch. The world is not, in fact, becoming a more dangerous place; as I document in my new book, the march to modernity is creating new Asian middle classes in the hundreds of millions who are responsible stakeholders and want to join America in creating a more peaceful and stable world order.

Unfortunately, even as the world is becoming more predictable, America is becoming less so. It has one of the least informed populations on the planet, and the quality of the presidential debates on global issues has been appalling. Bhutto's death provided the candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their statesmanship toward a pivotal country. But they all failed this test, resorting to grandstanding instead. Hillary Clinton, for example, declared her longstanding friendship with Benazir but failed to mention Bhutto's many flaws. Bill Richardson excoriated President Pervez Musharraf and called for the elimination of U.S. aid to Pakistan, but failed to mention that Pakistan's long military rule was a direct result of U.S. support. Such statements betrayed an apparent failure to grasp the complexity of the world. By and large, the candidates have wasted the opportunity to provide new intellectual and political leadership to America and the world. This is probably the greatest tragedy of the race. There has never been a greater need for new U.S. leadership, yet the candidates offer little hope that this will come any time soon.

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