

news

OBAMA: Win makes historic presidential election

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Arizona.

Obama and his running mate, Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, will take their oaths of office as president and vice president on Jan. 20, 2009.

As the 44th president, Obama will move into the Oval Office as leader of a country that is almost certainly in recession, and fighting two long wars, one in Iraq, the other in Afghanistan.

The popular vote was close, but not the count in the Electoral College, where it mattered most.

There, Obama's audacious decision to contest McCain in states that hadn't gone Democratic in years paid rich dividends.

Obama has said his first order of presidential business will be

to tackle the economy. He has also pledged to withdraw most U.S. combat troops from Iraq within 16 months.

Fellow Democrats rode his coattails to larger majorities in both houses of Congress. They defeated incumbent Republicans and won open seats by turn.

The 47-year-old Illinois senator was little known just four years ago. A widely praised speech at the Democratic National Convention, delivered when he was merely a candidate for the Senate, changed that.

Overnight he became a sought-after surrogate campaigner, and he had scarcely settled into his Senate seat when he began preparing for his run for the White House.

A survey of voters leaving polling places on Tuesday showed the economy was by far the top Election Day issue. Six

in 10 voters said so, and none of the other top issues — energy, Iraq, terrorism and health care — was picked by more than one in 10.

"May God bless whoever wins tonight," President Bush told dinner guests at the White House, where his tenure runs out on Jan. 20.

The Democratic leaders of Congress celebrated in Washington.

"It is not a mandate for a party or ideology but a mandate for change," said Senate Majority leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

Said Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California: "Tonight the American people have called for a new direction. They have called for change in America."

Shortly after 11 p.m. in the East, The Associated Press count showed Obama with 338 electoral vote, well over the

270 needed for victory. McCain had 127 after winning states that comprised the normal Republican base.

The nationwide popular vote was remarkably close. Totals from 58 percent of the nation's precincts showed Obama with 51 percent and McCain with 47.9.

Interviews with voters suggested that almost six in 10 women were backing Obama nationwide, while men leaned his way by a narrow margin. Just over half of whites supported McCain, giving him a slim advantage in a group that Bush carried overwhelmingly in 2004.

The results of the AP survey were based on a preliminary partial sample of nearly 10,000 voters in Election Day polls and in telephone interviews over the past week for early voters.

Democrats also acclaimed

Senate successes by former Gov. Mark Warner in Virginia, Rep. Tom Udall in New Mexico and Rep. Mark Udall in Colorado. All won seats left open by Republican retirements.

In New Hampshire, former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen defeated Republican Sen. John Sununu in a rematch of their 2002 race, and Sen. Elizabeth Dole fell to Democrat Kay Hagan in North Carolina.

Democrats also looked for gains in the House. They found their first in Florida, defeating Rep. Tom Feeney, and another in Connecticut, where 22-year veteran Chris Shays was swept away by the Democratic tide.

The resurgent Democrats also elected a governor in one of the nation's traditional bellwether states when Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon won his race.

YOUTH VOTE: Large turn out in favor of Obama

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also spent her previous weekend canvassing for the Illinois senator in rural Iowa.

That kind of loyalty — and the Obama campaign's early efforts to harness young voters — paid off at the ballot box.

Exit polls showed that young voters were supporting him by a more than 2-1 margin, with his greatest support coming from black and Hispanic young people. The preliminary results are similar to those from polls conducted before the election.

Overall, about two-thirds of voters younger than 30 supported Obama. And the overwhelming majority of black voters and about three-quarters of Hispanic voters in that age bracket said they voted for Obama. Many young voters said Obama being black was a non-issue.

Meanwhile, more than half of white youth cast a vote for the senator from Illinois, while more than two out of five supported John McCain, the senator from Arizona.

Many young voters, black youth included, saw this election as their chance to help make history. And they did.

"I've been wanting to vote. I'm finally part of it," said Chamar Morrison, a 19-year-old sophomore at North Carolina Central University who is black and who voted for Obama. She listed the cost of a college education and the war in Iraq as two of her top issues.

The exit polls showed support for Obama steadily decreasing as the age of the voters who were questioned increased. For instance, a little over half of voters older than 65 supported McCain. But this time, it was the younger generations who had the final say.

The survey results are based on a random sample of nearly 18,000 voters in Election Day exit polls and telephone interviews over the past week for early voters. The exit poll was conducted for The Associated Press by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International.

Mark Hugo Lopez, associate

director at the Pew Hispanic Center, said the exit poll results fit his expectations. He also noted that in 2004 young, white voters went for President Bush over Democrat John Kerry, like the older age groups did.

This time, there was a shift in favor of the Democrats.

Lopez said strong support from young voters clearly helped Obama win.

"I think they had a large impact," said Lopez, who was formerly the research director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, which tracks young voters.

There had been some speculation that Obama's race may have been a factor in the election. Many young voters, however, said Obama's race wasn't relevant. And Lopez noted that his own organization's surveys of young Hispanic voters had found that about half of them thought Obama's race would help him win the support of their age group.

Young voter participation,

which has ebbed and flowed over the years, has been on an upswing since the 2000 presidential election, though the impact of young voters was not as strongly felt because, while they leaned Democratic, they were more evenly split between the major candidates.

In 2004, about 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted, up from 36 percent in 2000, according to the Census Bureau. No other age group increased its turnout by more than 5 percentage points in 2004.

Overall, voters younger than 30 make up about 17 percent of the electorate. Exit polls numbers cannot, however, be used to compare participation among the age groups.

As the crowd at Chicago's Grant Park became increasingly giddy as it became clear that Obama was on his way to victory, 21-year-old Erica Ravi and 18-year-old Eric Reynolds, both students at nearby Columbia College, performed an impromptu rap with friends.

"O to the B to the A-M-A

— I know Obama's gonna win today," they said in unison. "O to the B to the A-M-A — I know there's gonna be a change today."

There were, of course, some young voters who were disappointed with Tuesday's results. They included Joey Yost, a 22-year old Republican in Washington, D.C., who voted for McCain via absentee ballot in his home state of Ohio, which went to Obama.

"I'm disappointed, but I knew it was coming," said Yost, a recent college graduate who works on Capitol Hill.

"It's good that we've become a powerful part of the electorate," he added, referring to young voters. "I just wish we voted more Republican than Democratic."

Associated Press Polling Analyst Coralie Carlson and AP writers Karen Hawkins and Sophia Tareen in Chicago and Gary D. Robertson in Durham, N.C., contributed to this report.