

★ US ELECTIONS ★

THE GENERAL ELECTION

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- Third debate - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/us_elections_2008/7672978.stm
- Polls - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/629/629/7360265.stm
- Ads - <http://politicalrealm.blogspot.com/search/label/Ad%20Wars>
- Results - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/us_elections_2008/7697829.stm

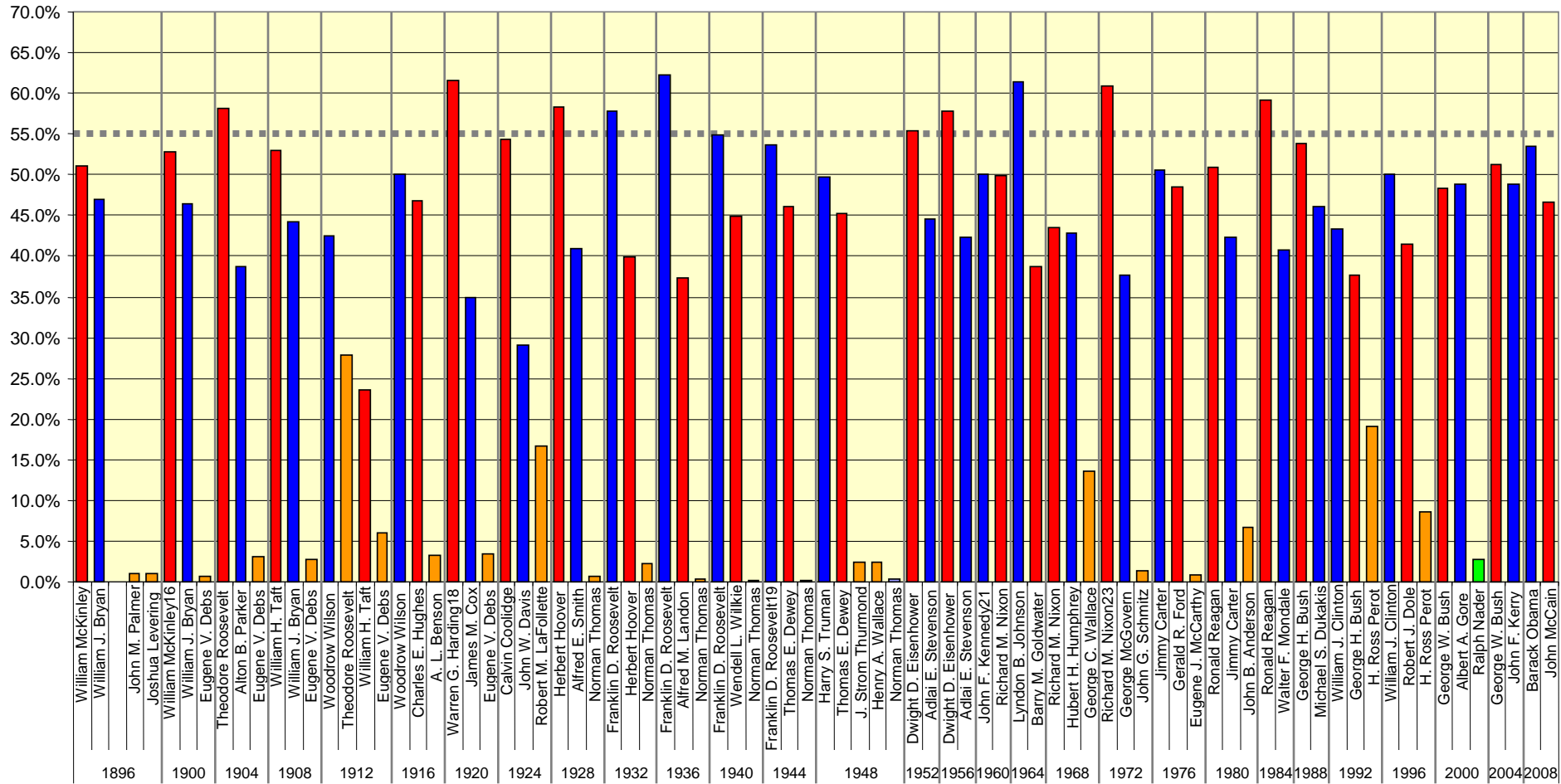
The 2008 Presidential Election: Why Obama didn't win by a landslide

By Dean McSweeney – UWE July 2009

History of Landslide Elections

- Definition: Landsl = 55+ % of pop vote
- 1896- 2004 = 10 landslides
- Some generalisations – most involved an incumbent President, so a commentary on a Pres running for re-election (large maj confirmed, Hoover 1932 decisively rejected).
- 3 phases – in each one party dominated and in some elections that party won even bigger than usual (only exceptions are Eisenhower twice in Dem era).
- Landslides actually quite common – nearly every 2nd election 1896-1984

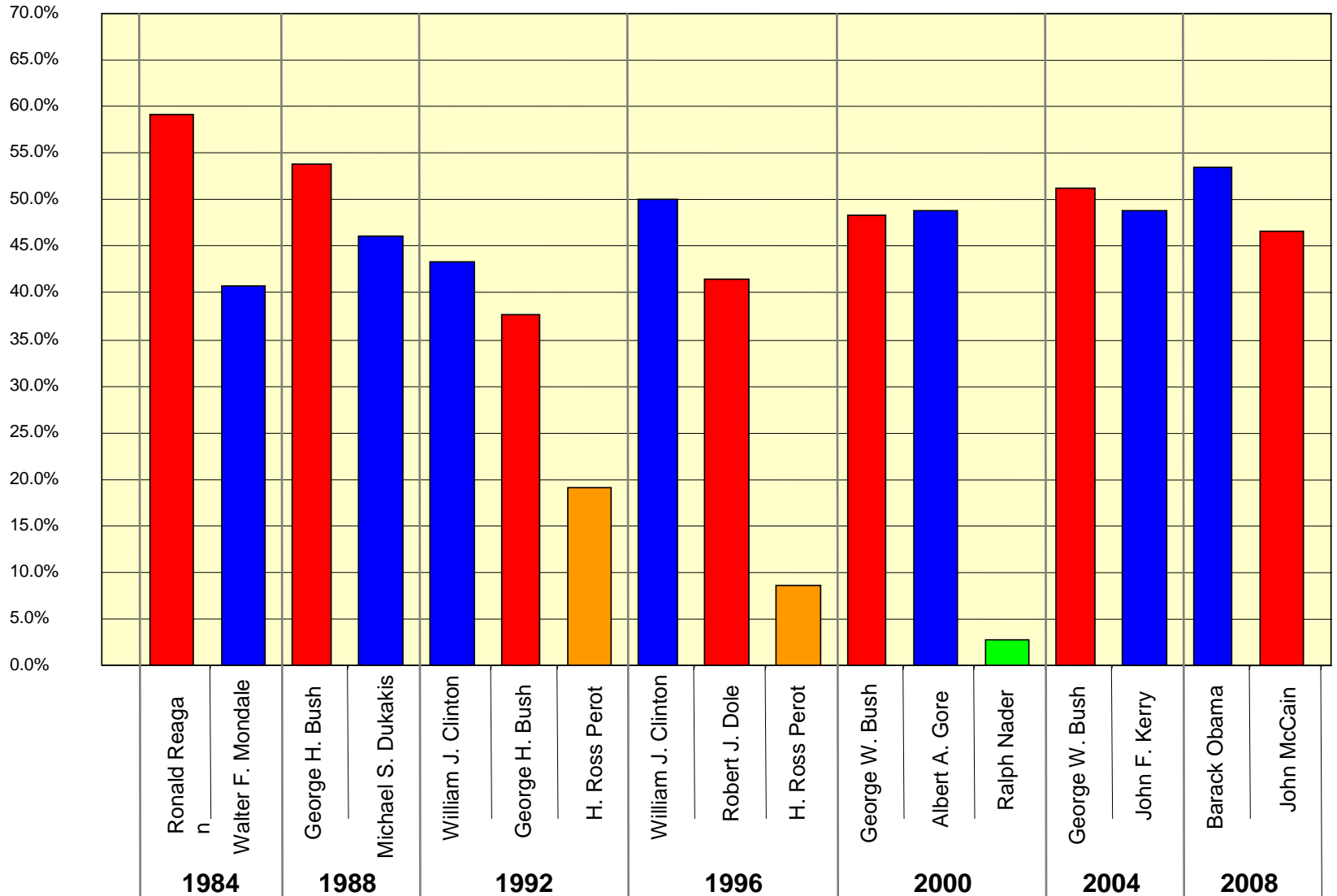
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Were conditions propitious for a landslide in 2008?

- no inc Pres, so their party didn't get adv/disadv of incumbency – doesn't carry over to cand seeking to succeed him. Therefore, a landslide unlikely.
- since 1988 there has been a series of close elections, no dominant party, so unlike historic pattern (3 phases)
 - also true at local levels & reflected in close majorities in Congress, even when run of Rep wins + also refl'd in Govs elections.
- No landslides since Reagan's re-elect in 1984 – prev landslides nearly every other election & no long run (3 elections +) without a landslide.

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- Since 1984:
 - Rep and Dem voters balanced in nos and ideologically aligned
 - party identifiers ideol loyal to their parties
 - Defections few and some of these to third parties, not other major party.
 - These alignments likely to hold as long as Reps nominate an essentially con candidate.
 - Independents don't tilt heavily one way or the other, so potential to create landslide purely theoretical
- All this a contrast with 1950s and 1960s – people swapped party more willingly dep on circumstances (e.g. Eisenhower attracted normally Dem voters, Goldwater too extreme for many normal Reps).
- So now v low ceiling on how high party can go in support levels for Pres contests – many people will never swap party unless ideological locations change dramatically.
 - > So landslide v unlikely in 2008.

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But weren't circs so favourable to Dems in 2008 that they really ought to have done better?

- Bush v unpop, war unpop, country seen as heading in wrong direction, econ (incl unempl, healthcare) principal concern (= Dem issue, also out-party issue so doubly signif).
- yet Obama only won 53.7% - **Why?**

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Was Obama's skin colour a key factor?

- Long history of Gallup polling on this - 94% say now that they would be prepared to vote for a black candidate.
- Is this a politically corrected response? – but as 6% are prepared to say never still, that suggests that a white Dem candidate might have attracted some more votes. (Being a smoker, Mormon, elderly or three-times married all carry higher penalties in polling).
- **The campaign:** Did very little to prompt racial considerations.
 - Obama as supra-racial candidate (able, competent, change-making, “floating above race”) – but played down race, ads showed him with white people (selective showing of rally audiences?) and the members of his mother's family, stress on brought up in Kansas (avoiding Hawaii)
 - McCain – ignored racially-loaded policies – crime, welfare, aff action - & ignored Revd Wright eruption (heroic restraint on his part)..
 - (Palin campaign less careful, but McCain broke with some prev Rep precedents – perhaps issues are now less potent, perhaps Reps now less squeamish).

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- **Race and Voting**
- Obama won 43% of white voters (Dem average 40% 1972-2004)
 - McCain won 55% of whites
- Obama won 30% of white southerners (Dem av 33% 1972-2004)
 - actually won 3 states (compare 1 for Kerry and Gore, 4 for Clinton)
 - and Obama a *northern* Dem)
- but compared to 2004, southern white vote did fall sharply in some states – Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi.
County analysis shows biggest falls in “old south” places with fewer blacks and many native white southerners.

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Race an asset? - a less white election?

- Higher turnout by minorities?
Blacks 11% of electorate in 2004, 13% (of larger electorate) in 2008
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/us_elections_2008/7709852.stm
- Record % support for Dems from blacks (95% support) and Asians (fluid voters, 2/3 voted for Ob)
- Recovery of Hispanic support for Dems (to c2/3 – return to 1990s levels, close to record Dem support)
- but Ob did very well, compared to prev Dem candidates with:
 - women
 - liberals
 - 18-29 (prev closely divided group, sometimes Rep)
 - White 18-29 year olds (bigger maj than any prev Dem candidate)
- did his race actually help him with these groups?

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- So Ob's actually a very strong performance – race plays a part but not nec neg or positive, not strong impact either way.
- Would a white Dem cand have done even better in this election?
e.g. Hillary Clinton
Match-up polls – end of May 2008
 - McCain 45% - Clinton 47%
 - McCain 46% - Obama 46%
- So small Clinton bias, but within margin of error. Maybe shows race effect?
- But Reps wd have preferred to run against Clinton, poll before Reps got to work with attack ads.

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Forecasting models:

- 11 forecasts – 10 taking no account of who candidates are:
 - 2 predicted Rep win
 - 9 predicted Dem wins (of which 3 forecast Dem landslide)
 - Median forecast for Dem vote = 52%
- 1 attempt once Obama selected to apply a racial discount to their model, factoring in a 6% reduction in the Dem vote (forecast to 50.1% to standard model 56.6%).

This turned out to be pretty inacc, so race not really a factor – effects cancel each other out.

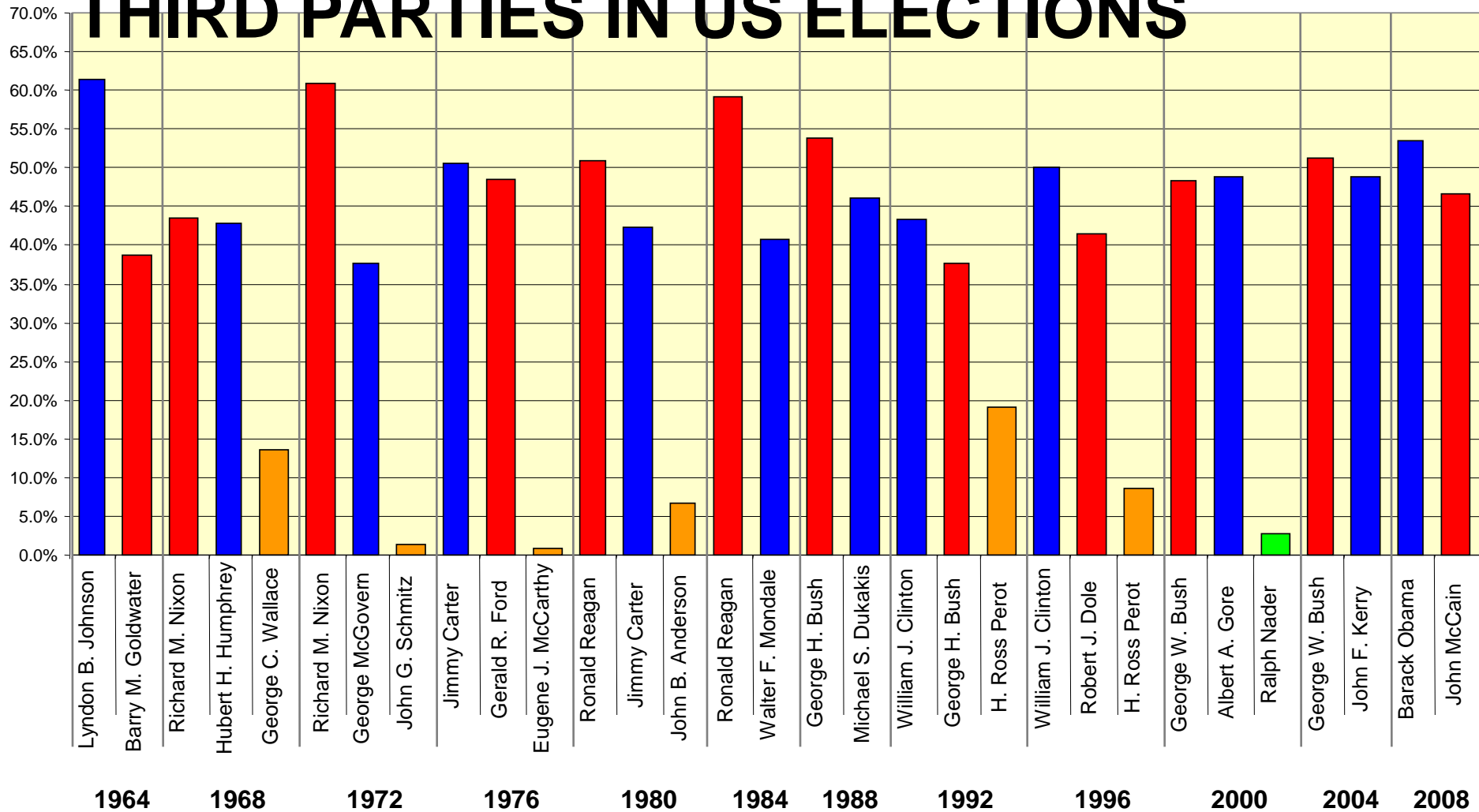
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Conclusion – not a landslide, but...

- Obama's result the second best for Dem party since Roosevelt was the candidate (1944)
- only once in last 15 elections did a Dem win with more than 50% of the vote (LBJ landslide).
- So Obama an abnormally strong candidate in an era when landslides are much less likely than 20 or more years ago
- And against the only possible Republican nominee able to run against the Bush legacy – McCain.

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THIRD PARTIES IN US ELECTIONS



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Additional Reading:

2008 Election analysis (follow links) -

<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/SETUPS2008/2008.jsp>

Turnout - http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

Historical comparisons -

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/elections.php>

- **Article: *US Presidential Election 2004*, Edward Ashbee, Politics Review February 2005**
- **Article: *Update: Turnout*, Edward Ashbee, Politics Review September 2005**
- **Article: *Race and ethnicity in US Politics*, William Storey, Politics Review September 2007**

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Research Exercise: *The Electoral College*

Federal Register: Electoral College -

<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/index.html>

Debatebase case -

http://www.idebate.org/debatebase/topic_details.php?topicID=210

National Constitution Center -

<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/Files/popvote.pdf>

Green Papers analysis with data -

<http://www.thegreenpapers.com/Census00/FedRep.phtml>

Academic study of the Electoral College (note date) -

<http://www.fec.gov/pdf/eleccoll.pdf>

America.gov – good on controversy -

<http://www.america.gov/publications/ejournalusa/0908.html>

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Electoral College reading

- Textbook: *US Government and Politics*, Anthony J Bennett – p91- 97
- Article: *The Electoral College: Why so difficult to reform?* Anthony J Bennett, Politics Review September 2006

Essay Question

Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Electoral College. [June 2006]