

President Obama's re-election victory cements historic accomplishment

Written by Perry Bacon, Jr.
Thursday, 08 November 2012 15:53 -



In 2008, President Obama ensured his place in the annals of American history as the first black president.

But by winning re-election, Obama cements that achievement. The nation's decision to embrace a non-white male chief executive is now no longer an aberration, a victory in a year (2008) in which arguably everything went right for Obama and wrong for the Republicans.

Now, Obama has won the majority of American votes despite an intense, organized opposition to his leadership, historically high unemployment during his tenure, hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign ads criticizing him, and a set of policies that sharply divided the two political parties.

In 2008, Americans elected the idea of Obama and a black president. In 2012, they powerfully affirmed that decision.

If Obama had lost, his defeat would have been more about the sagging economy than race, as many voters who backed him in 2008 opted against doing so this year. But a loss by Obama would have highlighted the racial division that still exists in America (almost 60 percent of whites backed Mitt Romney, while fewer than 10 percent of blacks did), and the president's reelection will strengthen the voices of those who say America is growing more accepting of its increasing diversity.

President Obama's re-election victory cements historic accomplishment

Written by Perry Bacon, Jr.

Thursday, 08 November 2012 15:53 -

Obama now has the chance to become one of presidents considered great, or at least one celebrated by his own political party, as Ronald Reagan is revered among conservatives. That almost certainly could not have happened if Obama lost, as few presidents who are defeated in their attempts at a second term are considered successes, either by historians or even by their own party. (Think Jimmy Carter or George H.W. Bush, compared to Reagan or Bill Clinton.)

By winning reelection, Obama can also reshape how he is defined in history. He will always be remembered first for breaking the nation's color barrier at its highest level. But Obama can now seek to broaden his legacy from race to his achievements: the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the health care law, the rescue of the auto companies. In particular, "Obamacare," which Mitt Romney would have tried to eliminate or gut, now has the chance to become like Social Security or Medicare, a broad social program that most Americans support and is essentially impossible to get rid of.

To be sure, nothing is guaranteed. George W. Bush was elected to a second term, but lost much of his political capital and public standing less than a year later because of his lackluster response to Hurricane Katrina. Obama is hoping Republicans opt to work with him now that he has won reelection, but the GOP could opt to continue to oppose him, viewing this election less on a referendum on ideas and more the failure of Romney, a candidate conservatives have long considered flawed. And while the economy is expected to improve, this too remains uncertain. Obama could preside over a steady decline in the U.S.'s economic influence.

Nonetheless, Obama's win on Tuesday is a powerful statement. With a man named Barack Hussein Obama elected president twice, non-white candidates of both parties can never again consider race a permanent barrier to victory. Obama's strong performance among minorities and women (getting more than 80 percent of the non-white vote and the majority of women) could permanently end a long American tradition: the all-white male presidential ticket.

Follow Perry Bacon Jr. on Twitter at @perrybaconjr