

Aleksandra Niemczyńska

Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora
Jagiellonian University

Changing Image? An Analysis of Obama's Characteristics According to 2007–2010 Survey Reports

Abstract

The image of Barack Obama as an intelligent, charismatic person, ready to take up new challenges, as well as the election campaign – stressing techniques associating his ideas with general images of hope and change – are some of the main factors that paved his way to the White House and granted him success. Since his taking office on January 20th 2009, several months have already passed and certain alterations in conducting politics may clearly be observed. The changes are also visible in perceiving the president himself.

This paper, basing on the Survey Data since 2007 until now, concentrates on the analysis of these changes. The author is trying to trace the perception of the image of Barack Obama in the context of his rivalry for the position of the Democratic Presidential Candidate against Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, his victorious battle for presidency with John McCain, and his current activity as the President of the United States. Particular emphasis has been placed on the perception of the personal elements of his image, i.e. certain features of his character and his convictions. The author's attempt is to find an answer to the question: In what direction is the perception of Obama's image going to change?

As we know, the image of Barack Obama as an intelligent, charismatic person, ready to take up new challenges, as well as the election campaign – stressing techniques associating his ideas with general images of hope and change – were some of the main factors that paved his way to the White House and granted him success. Since his taking office on January 20th 2009, several months have already passed and certain alterations in conducting politics may clearly be observed. The changes are also visible in perceiving the president himself.

In my paper I will try to investigate the perception of the image of Barack Obama, basing on the Survey Data since 2007, and focus on the perception of the personal elements of his image. I will try to find an answer to the question: In what direction is the perception of Obama's image going to change? And what consequences may it bear for the future?

The first point of my dissertation presents the image of Barack Obama in the context of his rivalry for the position of the Democratic Presidential nominee against

Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. At the beginning I would like to compare Obama with his rivals according to the survey of 2007. As can be seen in the first table (Table 1), among the leading Democrats, Obama had the highest overall favorability ratings (64% against 61% for John Edwards and 55% for Hillary Clinton) although he lost 1% to Hillary Clinton (19% to 20%) in the overall point “very favorable”. But Obama had the highest rate in the opinion of independent and Republican voters. Sixty-seven percent of independent voters who were able to rate Obama have a positive impression of him, compared to 64% for Edwards and 53% for Clinton. Thirty-nine percent of Republican voters able to rate Obama had a favorable opinion of him against just 19% for Clinton. Although Clinton had the lowest rating from voters supporting the opposing party of any of the tested candidates in August 2007, she had stronger support among Democratic voters than either Obama or Edwards (88% to 83% respectively) and 38% compared to Obama’s 30% in the point “very favorable”.

Table 1. August 2007

Rating the Leading Democratic Candidates				
	All voters %	Rep %	Dem %	Ind %
Barack Obama				
Favorable	64	39	83	67
<i>Very favorable</i>	19	6	30	17
Unfavorable	36	61	17	33
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
Can't rate	19	17	20	16
John Edwards				
Favorable	61	33	83	64
<i>Very favorable</i>	13	5	23	10
Unfavorable	39	67	17	36
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
Can't rate	19	17	20	16
Hillary Clinton				
Favorable	55	19	88	53
<i>Very favorable</i>	20	4	38	13
Unfavorable	45	81	12	47
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
Can't rate	4	3	3	5
Favorability ratings based on those who can rate each candidate. Based on registered voters.				

Source: “Clinton and Giuliani’s Contrasting Images: View of Leading ‘08 Candidates”, August 23, 2007, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

The next table (Table 2) which I would like to present contains the voters impressions of leading candidates. This survey was concluded in September 2007 when voters started to pay closer attention to personal features of several leading candidates. The survey contains nine expressions (like “tough,” “smart,” “compassionate,” “energetic,” “down-to earth,” “even-tempered,” “optimistic,” “honest” and “friendly”). As it may be noticed in Table 2, Democratic voters associate Obama with words such as “energetic,” “down-to earth,” “even-tempered,” “optimistic,” “honest” and “friendly,” while his main rival – Hillary Clinton had been seen as “tough” and “smart.” This characterization of Obama seems to be very important, especially in the context of his campaign in which he was fighting for the Democratic nomination mainly with Hillary Clinton. In his campaign, he had often emphasized the fact that he had a better chance than Clinton to win the votes of the independent and Republican.

When it became clear that only three candidates for the White House had been left on the political scene, i.e. Obama and Clinton on the Democratic side and McCain as a Republican representative, most polls started to compare these three figures. Those candidates differed considerably from one another, which was reflected in voters' opinions describing Obama, Clinton and McCain. According to the survey of February 2008 (Table 3), in general, Obama was described, as very positive (like “charismatic,” “intelligent,” “change,” “inspirational”), but on the other hand “inexperienced.” Clinton was most often described as “experienced.,” as well as “strong” and “untrustworthy.” McCain was perceived as “old” far more frequently than “honest” or “experienced.”

Table 2. September 2007

Democratic Words Associations			
	Clinton	Obama	Edwards
Tough	67	14	7
Smart	52	23	8
Compassionate	33	25	24
Energetic	33	40	12
Down-to-earth	28	30	27
Even-tempered	25	32	26
Optimistic	24	41	19
Honest	24	32	19
Friendly	22	31	28

Source: “Clinton Seen as ‘Tough’ and ‘Smart’ – Giuliani as ‘Energetic: Voter Impressions of Leading Candidates,” September 20, 2007, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Table 3. February 2008

The Leading Candidates in a Word		
Obama	Clinton	McCain
Inexperienced Charismatic Intelligent Change Inspirational	Experienced Strong Untrustworthy Intelligent Smart	Old Honest Experienced Patriot Conservative

Source: “Obama Has The Lead, But Potential Problems Too: Increasing Optimism About Iraq,” February 28, 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

It becomes obvious that experience was not the highest valued factor for voters decisions in Democratic presidential primaries which had started over a month before this survey was concluded and in which Obama took the lead. It would therefore appear that the need for changes and Obama’s personal qualities – such as his charisma and intelligence – began to be more important than experience and strength.

This is also confirmed by a survey of March 2008 (Table 4), conducted – which is important – among white Democrats. The majority of white Democratic voters saw Obama as “inspiring,” “honest,” “patriotic,” and “down-to-earth.” Obama’s image outranked Clinton’s in almost every personal feature tested in the survey, apart from patriotism. Moreover, twice as many white Democrats used the expression “phony” to describe Clinton rather than Obama (30% contrary to 16% accordingly). And the difference was even greater in the estimations of likability; the phrase “hard-to-like” describing Clinton were used by 43% of white Democratic voters while only 13% said it referring to Obama. White voters’ opinions of Barack Obama were also influenced by the way how the Illinois senator made them feel. Moreover, he was perceived as “inspiring” far more frequently than other candidates.

The next survey (Table 5) was concluded in September 2008, and more precisely after the television debates between two presidential candidates; Barack Obama and John McCain. This survey contains one-word impressions, tested among debates’ viewers. Both candidates received complimentary reviews for the debate, but the viewers had very different impressions of the candidates’ performances. While estimating both candidates’ during the debate, those who watched used words “confident,” “inexperienced,” as well as “intelligent” with Obama, on the other hand, “experienced” followed by “old” and “knowledgeable” in relation with McCain’s performance.

The next table (Table 6) presents one-word impressions of Obama, of September 2008 and February 2009 (so after first few weeks in his office). It’s worth noticing that the public has changed opinion of Barack Obama since the presidential campaign. While asking for a one-word characterization of Barack Obama, more people were using words like “intelligent,” “honest,” “confident” and “smart,” and fewer,

Table 4. March 2008

How White Democrats View the Prospective Nominees			
	Obama	Clinton	<i>Diff</i>
<i>Think of as...</i>	%	%	
Inspiring	80	65	+15
Down-to-earth	78	63	+15
Honest	79	66	+13
Patriotic	78	90	-12
Phony	16	30	-14
Hard-to-like	13	43	-30
	Obama	Clinton	
<i>Has made you feel...</i>	%	%	
Hopeful	68	62	+6
Proud	53	55	-2
Uneasy	29	30	-1
Angry	19	29	-10
Based on Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters.			

Source: “Obama Weathers the Wright Storm, Clinton Faces Credibility Problem: National Discontent Approaches 20-Year High, Bush Approval at 28%,” March 27, 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Table 5. September 2008

One-Word Debate Impressions			
Obama		McCain	
Confident	50	Experienced	61
Inexperienced	31	Old	38
Intelligent	31	Knowledgeable	33
Presidential	28	Confident	26
Good	22	Strong	20
Change	16	Honest	19
Arrogant	14	Condescending	18
Strong	13	Good	15
Prepared	12	Aggressive	13
Knowledgeable	12	Angry	13
Responses from registered voters who watched the debate. Figures show numbers of respondents who offered each response; these numbers are <i>not percentages</i> .			

Source: “Obama Boosts Leadership Image and Regains Lead Over McCain: Growing Concerns About Palin’s Qualifications,” October 1, 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

“inexperienced,” “change,” “young” and “new.” In this survey, 33 of the 660 people questioned came up with the terms “intelligent/ intellectual,” followed by “change” (17 people) and “honest” (16). As a matter of fact, the most frequently used word during the campaign was “inexperienced,” mentioned by 55 of the 629 registered voters interviewed in September. But in February, the word “inexperienced” was cited by only 15 people. “Change,” mentioned by 36 people, was the second most frequently used word in September; it was the second most widely used word, though only 17 people used it in February 2009. In September, the term “young/youthful” was mentioned by twenty people, but just five of them used one of these expressions in February. There are quite a lot of one-word impression words that appear on the list of Barack Obama characteristics in February, which were absent or infrequent in September. The adjectives like “great,” “confident,” “determined,” “smart,” and “sincere” were on the list of the most used expressions to describe the American president, but none of these words was recalled by four or more people in the pre-election survey in September.

Table 6. September 2008 – February 2009

From Candidate to President: One-Word Impressions of Obama			
#	September 2008	#	February 2009
55	Inexperienced	33	Intelligent/Intellectual
36	Change	17	Change
20	Intelligent/Intellectual	16	Honest
20	Young/Youthful	15	Confident
15	Charismatic	15	Inexperienced
14	New	14	Hope/Hopeful
12	Energetic/Energy	13	Smart
12	Hope/Hopeful	13	Socialist
12	Liberal	12	Good
10	Honest	11	Charismatic
9	Fresh	10	Great
9	Scary	9	Fantastic
8	Different	9	Leader
		9	Trying
		8	Determined
		8	Different
		8	Liberal
		8	President
		8	Sincere

Figure shows number of respondents who offered each response; these numbers are *not percentages*. Sept 2008 figures are based on registered voters.

Source: “Support for Stimulus Plan Slips, But Obama Rides High: 92% View Obama as Good Communicator,” February 9, 2009, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Another survey of February 2009 (Table 7) showed that, after nearly a month in office, Obama's personal image was extremely strong. Obama was perceived as a "strong" (77%) and "trustworthy" (76%) leader by overwhelming majorities, while an even higher percentage (92%) said he was a "good communicator." In addition, Obama is believed to represent a break from politics, despite the highly partisan reaction to his economic stimulus proposal. Sixty six percent of Americans, including Republicans, said that Obama "has a new approach to politics in Washington." In spite of facing some difficulties in his first few weeks in office, Obama's personal image was very favorable.

The next table (Table 8) – which present a survey of September 2009 – shows that the president's personal image slipped since the beginning of his administration, but it is still very strong. In September 83% of questioned people cited that Obama was "a good communicator," while 78% considered him as "warm and friendly." However, since February, while still overwhelmingly positive, Obama's ratings on these and other personal characteristics, have declined. There had been double-digit drops in positive views on several features of the president, including whether he cared about people like them (13 points), was a "trustworthy" (12 points) and "strong leader" (12 points), and "able to get things done" (12 points). In February, 70% of Americans assumed that Obama was "able to get things done" while just 15% thought the opposite. In September it was 58% to 31%.

In the survey concluded this year, in January 2010 (Table 9), the public evaluates Obama positively. Vast majorities perceived him as "a good communicator" (83%), "warm and friendly" (77%), "well-organized" (70%), and "well-informed" (69%). Most people also notice that Obama is someone who "cares about people like me" (64%), is "a strong leader" (62%), "trustworthy" (61%), and "able to get things done" (57%). There has been small general shift in views of Obama's personal image since

Table 7. February 2009

Obama's Positive Image	
Good communicator	92
Warm & friendly	87
Well organized	81
Cares about people like me	81
Well informed	79
Strong leader	77
Trustworthy	76
Able to get things done	70
New approach to politics	66

Source: "Support for Stimulus Plan Slips, But Obama Rides High: 92% View Obama as Good Communicator," February 9, 2009, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Table 8. September 2009

	Obama's Image: Less Glittering But Still Positive		
	February 2009 %	September 2009 %	<i>Change</i>
A good communicator	92	83	-9
Not a good communicator	6	13	+7
Neither/Don't know	2	4	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Warm and friendly	87	78	-9
Cold and aloof	8	16	+8
Neither/Don't know	5	6	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Well-informed	79	70	-9
Not well-informed	15	23	+8
Neither/Don't know	6	6	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Well-organized	81	69	-12
Not well-organized	12	22	+10
Neither/Don't know	6	8	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Cares about people like me	81	68	-13
Doesn't care	14	25	+11
Neither/Don't know	5	7	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
A strong leader	77	65	-12
Not a strong leader	13	29	+16
Neither/Don't know	10	7	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Trustworthy	76	64	-12
Not trustworthy	15	30	+15
Neither/Don't know	9	6	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Able to get things done	70	58	-12
Not able to get things done	15	31	+16
Neither/Don't know	15	11	
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	
Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding			

Source: "Obama Approval Ratings Steady, Personal Image Remains Positive: Most Continue to Say He Brings 'New Approach' to Politics," September 17, 2009, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

September 2009. Nonetheless, as it can be seen in Table 10, 61% of the independents regard Obama as someone who “cares about people like me,” which is 10 points down from September and 19 points down from February 2009. Despite this decrease, most independents evaluate Obama’s personal characteristics favorably. Republicans, on the other hand, have a more mixed view of Obama’s features. While majorities recognized him as “a good communicator” (70%), “warm and friendly” (56%), and “well-organized” (53%), they criticize president’s other personal traits. The majority points out that Obama seems to them as “not trustworthy” (63%), someone who is “not able to get things done” (61%), and “not a strong leader” (58%). Democrats almost unanimously assess Obama’s personal traits positively. Entirely 92% describe the president as “a good communicator” and 88% say he is “a strong leader.”

The Table “one word impressions of Barack Obama” (Table 11) presents the continuation, as well as some significant changes. As the top-of-the-mind description of the president – “intelligent” stays to be the one word used most often to describe

Table 9. February 2009, September 2009, January 2010

Obama's Personal Image Remains Positive				
<i>Which phrase better describes Obama?</i>	February 2009 %	September 2009 %	January 2010 %	<i>Sep-Jan Change</i>
A good communicator	92	83	83	0
Not a good communicator	6	13	14	+1
Warm and friendly	87	78	77	-1
Cold and aloof	8	16	16	0
Well-organized	81	69	70	+1
Not well-organized	12	22	23	+1
Well-informed	79	70	69	-1
Not well-informed	15	23	26	+3
Cares about people like me	81	68	64	-4
Doesn't care	14	25	30	+5
A strong leader	77	65	62	-3
Not a strong leader	13	29	32	+3
Trustworthy	76	64	61	-3
Not trustworthy	15	30	31	+1
Able to get things done	70	58	57	-1
Not able to get things done	15	31	35	+4
Q12a-i.				

Source: “Obama Image Unscathed By Terrorism Controversy: Few See Personal Upside to Health Reform,” January 14, 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Table 10. February 2009, September 2009, January 2010

	Republicans Criticize Obama's Trustworthiness, Leadership, Effectiveness and Empathy								
	Republicans			Democrats			Independents		
	Feb %	Sep %	Jan %	Feb %	Sep %	Jan %	Feb %	Sep %	Jan %
A good communicator	85	74	70	96	93	92	93	85	83
Not a good communicator	12	21	25	2	4	6	5	13	14
Warm and friendly	74	63	56	95	93	92	88	80	77
Cold and aloof	19	27	34	2	5	4	8	15	17
Well-informed	59	52	47	92	89	85	81	70	68
Not well-informed	36	41	45	4	7	12	12	25	28
Well-organized	64	54	53	93	85	87	83	72	67
Not well-organized	26	36	41	4	8	9	11	24	25
Cares about people like me	65	40	37	95	91	88	80	71	61
Doesn't care	28	51	55	4	6	9	14	24	33
A strong leader	56	36	34	93	90	88	78	65	58
Not a strong leader	31	57	58	2	6	10	12	29	36
Trustworthy	51	33	30	95	91	89	74	63	57
Not trustworthy	35	61	63	2	4	7	15	31	35
Able to get things done	48	35	33	86	81	80	71	57	52
Not able to get things done	33	55	61	4	11	14	12	34	38
Liberal	58	63	66	31	33	26	37	47	42
Middle of the Road	23	23	23	46	45	47	47	38	36
Conservative	12	5	6	16	11	19	10	10	14
Q12a-k. Figures read down, with percent saying "don't know" not shown									

Source: "Obama Image Unscathed By Terrorism Controversy: Few See Personal Upside to Health Reform," January 14, 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Obama, with 25 people offering it. Other words that people suggest when asked to characterize Obama in a single word contain "inexperienced" and "trying" (both mentioned 21 times); the number of people suggesting these expressions has increased since April 2009, when 13 people considered him as 'inexperienced' and 12 believed that he was "trying." "Good," "honest," "confident" and "strong" were other positive words that were said. On the negative side, people – asked for their one word impression of Obama – came up with the adjectives like "socialist," "unqualified," "arrogant" and "incompetent."

Table 11. September 2008, February 2009, April 2009, January 2010

One-Word Impressions of Barack Obama							
#	September 2008	#	February 2009	#	April 2009	#	January 2010
55	Inexperienced	33	Intelligent	30	Intelligent	25	Intelligent
36	Change	17	Change	29	Good	21	Inexperienced
20	Intelligent	16	Honest	20	Socialist	21	Trying
20	Young	15	Confident	17	Liberal	18	Good
15	Charismatic	15	Inexperienced	16	Great	15	Socialist
14	New	14	Hope/Hopeful	15	Confident	12	Honest
12	Energetic	13	Smart	13	Inexperienced	12	Unqualified
12	Hope/Hopeful	13	Socialist	12	Honest	11	Arrogant
12	Liberal	12	Good	12	Trying	11	Fair
10	Honest	11	Charismatic	11	Smart	11	Incompetent
9	Fresh	10	Great	10	Change	10	Confident
9	Scary	9	Fantastic	10	Competent	10	Different
8	Different	9	Leader	10	Excellent	10	Strong
7	Enthusiastic	9	Trying	10	Spender	8	Change
7	Unqualified	8	Determined	9	Arrogant	8	Great
6	Committed	8	Different	9	Hope/Hopeful	7	OK
6	Good	8	Liberal	8	Charismatic	7	Smart
6	Innovative	8	President	8	President	6	Capable
6	Inspiring	8	Sincere	7	Different	6	Disappointing
6	Liar			7	Leader	6	Excellent
6	Socialist					6	Fake
						6	Leader
						6	Liar
	N = 629		N = 660		N = 742		N = 740
QAF2. Figures show the actual number of respondents who offered each response; these numbers are <i>not percentages</i> . Sept 2008 figures are based on registered voters.							

Source: “Obama Image Unscathed By Terrorism Controversy: Few See Personal Upside to Health Reform,” January 14, 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

The last survey of March 2010 (Table 12, Table 13) contains the description of Obama in four terms and how he makes respondents feel. The public divides about evenly in evaluating Obama’s job performance, the personal opinions people have referring to Obama continue to be generally favorable. Vast majorities perceive Obama as “inspiring” (61%) and “decisive” (57%), while only about a third think of him as “arrogant” (35%) or “detached” (35%). More than half of respondents said that Obama makes them feel hopeful, while 43 percent thought the opposite. Forty nine percent of the respondents found that Obama makes them feel proud, but as many as 47% claim that he does not. Almost the half of interviewed (44%) feel disappointed in Obama,

Table 12. March 2010

	Most See Obama in Positive Terms			
	November 2008*		March 2010	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
<i>Describes Obama</i>				
Inspiring	81	18	61	36
Decisive	–	–	57	36
Arrogant	–	–	35	63
Detached	–	–	35	56
<i>Obama makes you feel...</i>				
Hopeful	69	29	54	43
Proud	65	32	49	47
Disappointed	–	–	44	53
Angry	9	91	30	68
Q10a–d and Q11a–d.				
* Nov 2008 trends from post-election survey of voters.				

Source: “Gloomy Americans Bash Congress, Are Divided on Obama Health Care Reform – Can’t Live With It, or Without It,” March 18, 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

compared to 53% which are not. In addition, 30% point out that Obama makes them feel angry. Since his election in November 2008, Obama’s positive estimations have dropped. At the time of elections, 81% define Obama as “inspiring,” compared with 61% today. Almost two-thirds in the post-election poll said Obama made them feel hopeful (69%) and proud (65%), in contrast with today, as only a half would use these words again. Moreover, soon after his election, just 9% claimed Obama made them feel angry, in comparison with 30% today. However, anger with Obama is common for the people on the political right; 62% of conservative Republicans admit to being angry with him, in comparison with 27% of moderate and liberal Republicans, 31% of independents and 17% of Democrats. Likewise, while most conservative Republicans considered Obama as “arrogant” (69%) and “detached” (62%), less than half in all other political groups – including moderate and liberal Republicans – agree.

In the analysis of the survey reports between August 2007 and March 2010 we need to make the distinction between the period of the campaign and the presidency. Each of these is characterized by its own rules. The first one is a period of promises, the second is the time when those promises can be fulfilled.

There is no doubt that during Obama’s campaign, the main strength of his image was the promise of change. This promise could be seen not only in his catchy slogans

Table 13. March 2010

	Conservative Republicans Angry, Democrats Still Inspired		
	Nov 2008*	March 2010	2010 N
	%	%	
Obama makes you feel angry			
Total	9	30	1,500
Conservative Rep	18	62	253
Mod/Lib Rep	14	27	95
Independent	8	31	543
Cons/Mod Dem	2	17	294
Liberal Dem	1	16	146
Obama is inspiring			
Total	81	61	1,500
Conservative Rep	61	25	253
Mod/Lib Rep	68	46	95
Independent	82	58	543
Cons/Mod Dem	95	85	294
Liberal Dem	99	86	146
Q11c and Q10a.			
* Nov 2008 trends from post-election survey of voters.			

Source: “Gloomy Americans Bash Congress, Are Divided on Obama Health Care Reform – Can’t Live With It, or Without It,” March 18, 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

like “Change We Can Believe In” or “Change We Need,” but also in his election program, pictured as a denial of the policy pursued by his predecessors. Among many important issues worth mentioning is Obama’s special attachment to such problems as: reform of health insurance systems and his attention paid to transparency in the world of politics, but the key issues during the campaign proved to be the war in Iraq and the intensifying economic crisis. Fortunately for Obama, his opponent – John McCain was not only a supporter of the actions in Iraq but also a person who represented values of the unpopular George W. Bush, he was a part of the “old” political system. In addition, McCain did not seem to understand the social sentiment about the economic situation of the American society, which has been proven in his famous sentence of September 2008: “the fundamentals of our economy are strong.” For many Americans it was no longer true. In opposition to him was Obama: spontaneous, less experienced, but perceived as an independent and “fresh” candidate. Obama’s consistent electoral strategy that refers to the promises of change won over experience of other candidates (first Democrats John Edwards and Hillary Clinton, then John McCain).

As has already been noticed, the need for change was very well reflected in pre-election polls. In the survey data of September 2008 in "one word impressions of Barack Obama" 36 voters mentioned the word "change" (Table 11). The situation became different after Obama took his office; the rates started to decline and are still continuing to fall. In February 2009 just seventeen people described Obama as a "change," in April 2009 ten, and in January 2010 only eight Americans considered him in the category of "change." What could be the reason for such a decline in the popularity of this word?

The post-election survey reports show that although Obama's picture is still positive, there are fewer and fewer Americans who believe in the positive effects of Obama's changes, especially in the face of an economic crisis. During the entire year 2009 and at the beginning of 2010 the unemployment rate was still very high. In March 2010 it amounted to 9,7 percent, and 16,9 percent when counting also the underemployed and those who have given up looking for the job.¹ Under such conditions it was difficult for people to see the beneficial effects of Obama's work. At the same time, in the United States there has grown a large group of people for whom some presidential actions are simply not acceptable. Obama's reforms: "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009" and the 2010 acts referring to health care reform turned out to be the trigger. The first of these documents assumed that, to stimulate the U.S. economy, the federal budget needed funds which were found by tax increases at the expense of the richer parts of the American society. Other acts introduced health insurance constraint, together with a fine for the lack of insurance, unless a person had very low income. Through those measures a radical, capitalistic social movement was born that opposed the increasing bureaucracy and taxes. The "Tea Party Movement" called for the simplification of the tax system, the cancellation of health care reforms, respect for the Constitution and the Civil Rights. As we can see, Obama, who during his conciliatory, idealistic campaign could count on more independent and Republican votes than his Democratic opponents, due to his controversial reforms has now led to a radicalization, especially within the Republican Party.

Obama's way from an inexperienced nominee and candidate to the confident president of the United States has been mainly based on the promises of something new, promises of changes. Since the beginning of his presidential campaign, Obama had stressed that he would take a different approach to politics in Washington, promising both a change in ethical standards and a more bipartisan effort in policymaking. But paradoxically, every time he tries to introduce new ideas the strong emotions arise because of his actions. So Obama has to choose, either to focus on "continuity," trying to improve a more bipartisan effort in making policy, or become more and more controversial (especially for the Republicans and independents) and try to bring real

¹ http://voices.washingtonpost.com/economy-watch/2010/04/march_unemployment_rate.html (accessed May 20, 2010).

changes. Gradually, changes in the perception of his image, as well as his actions, seem to say that he has chosen the second option.

Aleksandra Niemczyńska holds two MA degrees: in International Relations and Film Studies, both at the Jagiellonian University. Recently, she is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora (Jagiellonian University) where she is writing her Ph.D. dissertation about the image of China in American films. She spent one term as an international exchange student at the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto and received a scholarship from the Copernicus Society of America for research at Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. In her academic research she is interested in links that exist between the sphere of politics, society and the world of film.