

**WATCHING THE U.S. ELECTION FROM ABROAD:
NORMATIVE THEORY AND THE PUBLICS OF AMERICAN POLITICS**

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Abstract: We are told that “the whole world was watching” the 2008 U.S. presidential election, most hoping for a break with the policies of the Bush administration. The constitution of a global field of public opinion on American electoral politics may seem little more than a media spectacle. However, in this intervention I interpret it as a spur to engage with normative theories of the public sphere in order to critically assess our state of being in-between Westphalian and cosmopolitan modes of democracy.

Keywords: democracy; electoral politics; normative theory; transnational public sphere.

At around 11 o'clock in the morning on November 5th, 2008 (local time), the Colonial Room at the American Club of Singapore erupted in celebration as CNN called the 2008 U.S. presidential election for Democratic candidate Barack Obama. Although event organizers¹ had been aggressively bipartisan in their choice of decorations – the doors were flanked by life-sized cardboard cutouts of Obama (on the left) and Republican John McCain (on the right), campaign

posters were hung in Democratic-Republican dyads, and precisely equal numbers of McCain-Palin and Obama-Biden buttons were spread out on the tables – the crowd of roughly 200 Americans was very partisan indeed, perhaps because pre-election polls predicting a decisive win for Obama had kept local Republicans at home. Over brunch, there had been bursts of applause as live CNN coverage, projected on two giant screens, showed the Democratic candidate prevailing in key swing states like Pennsylvania and Ohio; when polls closed in the West and the outcome of the election was assured, many observers leapt to their feet as champagne corks popped. Meanwhile, knots of photographers and videographers from Singaporean media outlets tightened to capture the moment, their insistent cameras a powerful reminder that it was not only Americans living abroad who were closely watching the U.S. presidential election from afar.

Indeed, one might argue that deliberations over who should succeed George W. Bush took place within a global or transnational public sphere – an idea which, I argue in this intervention, invites us to bring normative theory to bear on questions about the relationship between national electoral politics and global social justice. After eight years of unilateral foreign policy, the “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emptive war, and other expressions of American neoimperial/hegemonic power (David and Grondin 2006, Glassman 2005, Harvey 2005; see also the 2003 forum in this journal on the American invasion of Iraq) – and with American financial markets at the epicenter of a deepening global economic crisis – there seemed to be broad consensus that the 2008 U.S. election was *everyone’s* business. Pundits and journalists had asserted throughout the presidential campaign that “the whole world was watching” (see, e.g., Associated Press 2008b, CBC Radio 2008), Gallup conducted a poll in 73 countries which found that international public opinion overwhelmingly favored Barack Obama over John McCain,ⁱⁱ and post-election coverage in both American and foreign media was preoccupied with cataloguing global reactions.ⁱⁱⁱ Watching the scene in the American Club of Singapore that morning, I was struck by the profound disjuncture between a global field of public opinion about the American election, on the one hand; and the sharply delimited community of voters defined by membership in the American nation-state, on the other.^{iv} While much of the world’s population may have felt that they had a stake in the U.S. presidential election, when it came to determining the outcome the voting public was limited to about 126 million American citizens

(Associated Press 2008a).^v In the end, the rest of the world was *only* watching, their political interests reduced to banal human interest segments.

What makes this an issue for normative theory? To answer this question I turn to a 2007 article in *Theory, Culture & Society*, in which philosopher Nancy Fraser argues forcefully for the importance of interpreting the Habermas' (1989 [1962]) conception of the public sphere as a potentially emancipatory structure which allows us to imagine – and to foster – conditions that enhance participatory democracy.^{vi} Seeking to “illuminate the emancipatory possibilities of the present constellation,” Fraser attempts to “reformulate *the critical theory of the public sphere*” (p.9, emphasis in original). The problem, she suggests, is that the notion of transnational public spheres is often deployed “in a relatively casual commonsense way, as if we already knew what they were,” without fully acknowledging the extent to which “public sphere theory has been implicitly informed by a Westphalian political imaginary” (p.8) – and therefore without fully exploring what a *transnational* public sphere might mean for democratic politics. Fraser attempts to provide a framework within which to conduct normative analysis of contemporary transnational/global publics,^{vii} carefully explicating the criteria which must be fulfilled in order for a transnational public sphere to function as an emancipatory and democratic structure. She argues that there are two principal requirements: first, the *normative legitimacy* of debates that take place within the transnational/global public sphere, which must be assured through *inclusiveness* (all affected individuals must have the opportunity to participate) and *participatory parity* (they must be able to deliberate as peers); and second, the *political efficacy* of public opinion, which can only exist if there is a *translation* of the will of the public into administrative action, and if that administrative action has the *capacity* to implement desired changes.

Refracted through Fraser's normative theory of transnational public spheres, the idea of a global or transnational public deliberating on American electoral politics becomes at once both necessary (under the all-affected principle) and impossible (under the parity and translation principles). While I do not wish to suggest that electoral politics should be our primary focus in thinking through the function of the public sphere, there could hardly be a starker illustration of the familiar aporia at the core of debates about “the state of the nation-state” amidst contemporary processes of globalization: while many social, economic and environmental problems are transnational or global in scope, national politics still dictate, to a significant degree, how those problems are addressed. We seem to be in something of an in-between state,

where Westphalian political structures are increasingly viewed as insufficient or even counterproductive, but comprehensive and effective institutions of cosmopolitan governance (perhaps most forcefully championed by Held, e.g. 1995, 2004) have yet to emerge.

From this perspective, the constitution of an extra-national public around American electoral politics must be seen as more than simply a media spectacle. Instead, it is a stark reflection of a democracy gap between the national and the global that arises from the contemporary reality of an in-betweenness where national policies often have far-reaching effects on those who have no recourse within the sphere of electoral politics. I contend that the multiscalar publics that emerged around the recent American election remind us of the need to delve into the conceptual space that lies in-between Westphalian and cosmopolitan modes of democracy, in order to generate ideas for making today's national, transnational and global political systems more just. Under what conditions might American policymakers become more responsive to opinion formed within a transnational/global public sphere? What are the prospects for a progressive political movement that combines the contestation of American neoimperialism from without with the political will for change from within? How might it operate, and through what spaces and practices? In what ways might it *matter* what the rest of the world thinks about an American election? By addressing these kinds of questions, we can chart clearer paths through the contemporary in-between and envision the sort of fair and effective global public sphere that might enhance global justice and facilitate the development of cosmopolitan democracy.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election Day Watch was jointly organized by the American Association of Singapore and the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore. Held at the American Club, the event was open to anyone who purchased a \$15 ticket.

ⁱⁱ International polls were also commissioned by BBC World Service (BBC News 2008) and Reader's Digest (2008). In each, Barack Obama was favored over John McCain by wide margins.

ⁱⁱⁱ Special sections on the worldwide reaction to the election of Barack Obama were run by at least the following news outlets: CNN, Fox News, *The Guardian UK*, *The International Herald Tribune*, al Jazeera, *The New York Times*, *le Nouvel Observateur*, and *Der Spiegel*.

^{iv} Eligibility to vote in U.S. elections is limited to American citizens aged 18 and over, whether or not they reside in the United States. However, most states have felon disenfranchisement laws which prevent people in prison or on parole for felony crimes (or even ex-felons) from voting; for a review of felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States, see Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen's *Locked Out* (2006).

^v As I write this, the official tally of votes cast in the presidential election has not yet been released, but as of 12:23 p.m. Eastern on November 21st, 2008 the Associated Press reported a total of 126,316,336 votes with 99% of precincts reporting nationwide.

^{vi} See also Pauline Johnson (2008) on Habermas and normative democratic theory.

^{vii} Fraser does not attempt to delineate the concept of a ‘global public sphere’ from that of a ‘transnational public sphere,’ though these are arguably quite different things. She uses the latter term almost exclusively.