

Obama is the better choice

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US presidential elections involve a fabulous expense of time, effort and money. Doubtless it is all too much – but, by the end, nobody can complain that the candidates have been too little scrutinised. We have learnt a lot about Barack Obama and John McCain during this campaign. In our view, it is enough to be confident that Mr Obama is the right choice.

At the outset, we were not so confident. Mr Obama is inexperienced. His policies are a blend of good, not so good and downright bad. Since the election will strengthen Democratic control of Congress, a case can be made for returning a Republican to the White House: divided government has a better record in the United States than government united under either party.

So this ought to have been a close call. With a week remaining before the election, we cannot feel that it is.

Mr Obama fought a much better campaign. Campaigning is not the same as governing, and the presidency should not be a prize for giving the best speeches, devising the best television advertisements, shaking the most hands and kissing the most babies.

Nonetheless, a campaign is a test of leadership. Mr Obama ran his superbly; Mr McCain's has often looked a shambles. After eight years of George W. Bush, the steady competence of the Obama operation commands respect.

Nor should one disdain Mr Obama's way with a crowd. Good presidents engage the country's attention; great ones inspire. Mr McCain, on form, is an adequate speaker but no more. Mr Obama, on form, is as fine a political orator as the country has heard in decades. Put to the right purposes, this is no mere decoration but a priceless asset.

Mr Obama's purposes do seem mostly right, though in saying this we give him the benefit of the doubt. Above all, he prizes consensus and genuinely seeks to unite the country, something it wants. His call for change struck a mighty chord in a tired and demoralised nation – and who could promise real change more credibly than Mr Obama, a black man, whose very nomination was a historic advance in US politics?

We applaud his main domestic proposal: comprehensive health-care reform. This plan would achieve nearly universal insurance without the mandates of rival schemes: characteristically, it combines a far-sighted goal with moderation in the method. Mr McCain's plan, based on extending tax relief beyond employer-provided insurance, also has merit – it would contain costs better – but is too timid and would widen coverage much less.

Mr Obama is most disappointing on trade. He pandered to protectionists during the primaries, and has not rowed back. He may be sincere, which is troubling. Should he win the election, a Democratic Congress will expect him to keep those trade-thumping promises. Mr McCain has been bravely and consistently pro-trade, much to his credit.

In responding to the economic emergency, Mr Obama has again impressed – not by advancing solutions of his own, but in displaying a calm and methodical disposition, and in seeking the best advice. Mr McCain's hasty half-baked interventions were unnerving when they were not beside the point.

On foreign policy, where the candidates have often conspired to exaggerate their differences, this contrast in temperaments seems crucial. For all his experience, Mr McCain has seemed too much guided by an instinct for peremptory action, an exaggerated sense of certainty, and a reluctance to see shades of grey.

He has offered risk-taking almost as his chief qualification, but gambles do not always pay off. His choice of Sarah Palin as running mate, widely acknowledged to have been a mistake, is an obtrusive case in point. Rashness is not a virtue in a president. The cautious and deliberate Mr Obama is altogether a less alarming prospect.

Rest assured that, should he win, Mr Obama is bound to disappoint. How could he not? He is expected to heal the country's racial divisions, reverse the trend of rising inequality, improve middle-class living standards, cut almost everybody's taxes, transform the image of the United States abroad, end the losses in Iraq, deal with the mess in Afghanistan and much more besides.

Succeeding in those endeavours would require more than uplifting oratory and presidential deportment even if the economy were growing rapidly, which it will not be.

The challenges facing the next president will be extraordinary. We hesitate to wish it on anyone, but we hope that Mr Obama gets the job.