

Champions League

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America's historic verdict

US gripped by excitement, hope and fear as voters turn out in record numbers

Ewen MacAskill
Suzanne Goldenberg Washington

Americans voted in epic numbers yesterday in the most eagerly anticipated US election for half a century, finally getting the chance to turn their back on eight years of George Bush and choose a president they hope will end the Iraq war, restore the country's image abroad and, above all, bring economic stability.

From the eastern shores of Virginia, across the industrial heartland of Ohio and on to the Rocky Mountain states of Colorado and New Mexico and beyond, poll workers and voters reported long lines and waits of several hours.

In a country that has a reputation for normally low interest at election time, turnout in Georgia was projected at 90% based on early votes and more than 80% in Nevada.

Reflecting the intensity of the campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain put in a final burst of campaigning after casting their own votes.

Obama made a final dash from his home in Chicago to neighbouring Indiana, which was Republican in 2004. Reporters travelling with him said the candidate was in a subdued rather than celebratory mood, perhaps reflecting the news of the death of his grandmother on Monday. Obama told them that whatever happened, the campaign, the costliest in US history at more than \$1bn, as well as the longest, had been "extraordinary".

'This is something that people want to be part of ... a part of history, a part of change'

At Obama headquarters in Chicago, a campaign worker described the mood as "optimistically nauseous", reflecting both the party's hopes and the lingering fear after Democratic defeats to Bush in 2000 and 2004.

McCain, who at 72 would be the oldest ever US president, made late dashes to New Mexico and Colorado, both of which were also Republican in 2004, before returning to his native Arizona to vote.

The Republican said he remained in contention – and was hoping for a surprise win. But there was an elegiac quality to his insistence.

"Look, I know I'm still the underdog, I understand that," he said. "You can't imagine, you can't imagine the excitement of an individual to be this close to the most important position in the world, and I'll enjoy it, enjoy it. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

The excitement generated by the campaign translated into high voter turnout, with election officials reporting extraordi-



Barack Obama holds up a ballot receipt yesterday after casting his vote in Chicago Photograph: Jae C Hong/AP

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'There are things in our history that have been horrible, just horrible, but now young people can see there is hope'

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nary levels of interest – to the extent that authorities in Colorado warned they might not be able to finish the count until today. One figure not to be seen anywhere yesterday was the incumbent George Bush, though he had already voted.

Democrats and Republicans admitted that the long lines were more likely to benefit Obama than McCain. Obama had based his strategy on driving up turnout among young people and African-American voters.

The next president will inherit horrendous economic problems that will limit the scope of his ambitions. Obama, in his final rallies, was already tempering his early promise of change with warnings about how he would have to curb some of his more ambitious plans, trying to lower expectations that he would be able to move quickly on healthcare and education reform.

But there was still palpable excitement in the air, with voters queuing up from

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Obama's town 'It feels like a new era kind of dawning'

Jonathan Freedland
Chicago

There was at least one supporter of John McCain visible on the streets of Chicago yesterday. He was young, white – and he was running.

He was not fleeing a hostile mob; he was simply taking a morning jog down Wacker Drive, wearing his McCain-Palin T-shirt. But it seemed like an act of bravery – or recklessness – all the same.

For Chicago is Barack Obama's town, in a state that he won with an astonishing 70% of the vote at the first time of asking, when he ran for the Senate just

four years ago. His standing as the city's favourite son now almost transcends politics. Even the Chicago Tribune, which had not endorsed a Democrat since it was founded in 1847, broke with tradition last month to recommend Obama for president.

So there was a mood of hushed expectancy across the city yesterday afternoon, the atmosphere of a town where the local football team is about to play in a historic cup final. The prize was so close, the people of Chicago could almost touch it.

And they had certainly planned for it. Long before voting ended, supporters were converging on Grant Park for what many assumed would become one of the great events of American history,

one that would rank alongside Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" address at the Lincoln Memorial. This, they told themselves, would be a victory party like no other.

The sense of expectation was quieter at the polling station for the 42nd ward of downtown Chicago. There, inside a building that houses both a student hall of residence and a retirement home, a steady line of old and young streamed in to pick up their ballot papers and fill in the solid black line that marked a vote for Barack Obama for president.

"It feels like a new era kind of dawning," said Peter Morris, a 23-year-old theology student. He had recently visited relatives in Oklahoma and their racism had shocked him: "There was

an attitude, even among some Democrats, that they wouldn't vote for him because he's black." Morris had voted with enthusiasm, he said, partly to show those relatives they were wrong.

He had been able to zip in and zip out. But for 66-year old Louise Buchanan, it was a longer journey. Using a walking frame, she inched towards a polling booth, stopping to catch her breath. Once there, she took her time, reading each line on the lengthy ballot paper – which included contests for the state senate and even the post of metropolitan water reclamation district commissioner. Eventually the job was done. She handed her paper to one of the

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