ELECTION 2008: OBAMA VS. MCCAIN
The 2008 presidential election, which pits an untested Democrat, Barack Obama, against a sometimes suspect Republican, John McCain, raises several major questions. Who will win the contest to wear the mantle of change? Will Barack Obama become the first African-American president? Will Sarah Palin become the first female vice president? Will America elect a Democratic president to serve with a Democratic congress or a Republican president, who promises to govern in a bipartisan manner? What challenges will face the new president at his inauguration on January 20? And what is the future of Christian conservatism?

In this article, three of Regent’s most distinguished professors give us their insights.

THE NEXT PRESIDENT FACES DAUNTING CHALLENGES
Robert D. Stacey, Ph.D.

Americans tend to look up to their presidents as agenda-setters, but whoever wins the upcoming presidential election will inevitably confront an array of foreign and domestic challenges not of his own choosing.

Regarding national security, the new president’s attention will likely turn from Iraq toward emerging threats elsewhere. Iranian nuclear ambitions, for example, are something no president can ignore. Barack Obama has said he would be willing to meet unconditionally with Iran’s head-of-state, while John McCain advocates a more assertive stance with economic sanctions and military options on the table. Either way, such threats will be high on the foreign policy agenda.

The state of the economy will also command the president’s attention. Current indicators point toward a modest short-term recovery, but longer-term risks such as the U.S. trade imbalance, the troubled housing market, and historically high global commodity and energy prices threaten not just the American economy but also the world economy. Obama’s consistent progressivism suggests more aggressive government intervention and regulation in an attempt to sure up economic uncertainties. McCain, for his part, is not a typical free-market conservative, and is unlikely to provide the kind of strong anti-interventionist leadership conservatives are hoping for, especially if confronted by a Democratic majority in Congress.

That is not all. Health care costs, for example, currently consume one sixth of the GDP and are rising considerably faster than inflation. Social Security, too, is on an unsustainable trajectory. On both issues the status quo is untenable, and we are likely to reach the political tipping point in the next administration. And none of this addresses the social issues that so deeply divide America.

Recently such issues have been driven more by the state governments and the courts than by presidential politics, but one can generally expect support for liberal social causes from the left-leaning Obama. McCain, however, is something of a wild card. While his abortion record is consistently pro-life, he favors fetal tissue research and state discretion on gay marriage.

So forget the carefully crafted stump speeches. Circumstances have a way of setting agendas. Some things are even out of the president’s hands.

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM
Gerson Moreno-Riano, Ph.D.

The hallmark of political science, we are often told, is its ability to predict the political future. As any astute observer of politics knows, this is a difficult endeavor. There simply is no crystal ball for politics. Thinking about the future of the Christian conservative movement in America should be less about predicting specific events and more about considering the continual development of the movement in the years ahead. To do this, we must have a sense of what Christian conservatism is in the here and now.

To many, the Christian conservative movement is readily identifiable, yet its current state is one that lacks any clear and defining characteristic. The term “Christian” no longer exhibits a unified and distinct theological vision. Rather, it is an amalgam of different theological traditions and impulses, all with competing values and visions of the world. Such pluralism fragments Christendom and impairs its ability to advance a unified vision of the relationship between the city of man and the City of God.

American conservatism is in no better
condition. There is a deep ambivalence among conservatives as to what it is that they should be preserving. What political principles should provide the foundation for American political life? Conservatives are not united in their answers to this question. There are vigorous debates among them concerning the role of religion, partisanship, science, natural rights and history as the foundational ideas of the American republic.

Uniting the terms “Christian” and “Conservative” thus results in a social movement that contains a generic understanding of Christianity and conservatism but that lacks a clear articulation of what this means in the 21st century. This lack of identity is exacerbated with the movement’s absence of leadership and purpose. The era of great Christian conservative statesmanship is coming to an end. What we have today is a vast market of purveyors of trendy ideas and principles clothed in Christian jargon but empty of substance.

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WHO WILL WIN: OBAMA OR MCCAIN?
Charles W. Dunn, Ph.D.

Who will win: Obama or McCain? Historians, political scientists, pollsters and psychologists have devised many models to predict the winner of presidential elections. To develop your own model, you may draw from theirs, which focus on the economy, optimism in speeches, charisma, party records, third-party participation, intra-party contests, win-streak analysis, public opinion polls, voter turnout and changing circumstances.

The Economy. Economists have discovered that when economic growth is significantly up, inflation down and disposable income up, the party in the White House usually wins. Public perception, however, may alter this outcome as it did in 1992, when based upon economic data, President George H.W. Bush should have beaten Bill Clinton, but the public’s perception of the economy was not good. Clinton advisor James Carville understood that when he said, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Optimism in Speeches. Some psychologists believe that optimism in candidate speeches holds the key to predicting the winner. For example, in 1980 Ronald Reagan used the theme “It’s morning in America” to beat Jimmy Carter, who spoke about “malaise in America.”

Charisma. In 1960 John F. Kennedy’s charisma enabled him to beat Richard Nixon in one of America’s closest presidential elections. Kennedy’s charisma became evident in his interactions with crowds and notably in the first televised debate. Television viewers picked Kennedy as the winner of the debate, but those who heard the debate on radio picked Nixon.

Party Record. If the incumbent party in the White House has a good performance record on major issues, that party’s candidate will likely win. This is something we have seen many times as in the multiple victories of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Of course, Reagan’s record significantly helped George H.W. Bush win in 1988.

Third-Party Participation. In 1912 the incumbent William Howard Taft lost in a three-way race against Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. In 1992 President George H.W. Bush lost in a three-way race against Bill Clinton and Ross Perot. Democrats believe that Ralph Nader’s third-party candidacy may have cost Al Gore and John Kerry their elections in 2000 and 2004. In 2008 Ralph Nader is running again, but Libertarians have tapped a former Republican, former Georgia Congressman Bill Barr as their candidate. Will either Nader or Barr adversely affect the outcome of this year’s election?

Intra-Party Contests. In 1980 Senator Ted Kennedy challenged Jimmy Carter’s renomination, and in 1992 Pat Buchanan contested George Bush’s renomination. Bush and Carter lost, in part because of intra-party wounds, which did not heal by the General Election. In 2008 will Senator Clinton’s aggressive campaign against Senator Obama damage his prospects for election, and will conservative Republicans disenchanted with Senator McCain fail to rally behind him?

Consecutive Elections Won. Based upon data from the Civil War through 2004, the incumbent party in the White House normally wins reelection after the first term and also has a marginal advantage in an election for a third term. This should give Senator McCain a slight advantage but, as shown above, other factors could preclude his winning.

Public Opinion Polls. Head-to-head polling data usually predicts the winner, but not always as in 1948 when Gallup predicted Thomas E. Dewey over Harry S. Truman. Another type of poll may also reveal the winner, namely favorability ratings. Candidates with “high negatives” are less likely to win. In 1980 Jimmy Carter’s “high negatives” pointed to trouble in his reelection bid.

Voter Turnout. The rule of thumb is this: a higher voter turnout favors Democrats, while a lower voter turnout favors Republicans. In 1976, with good weather in all 50 states, voters turned out in droves, which in part accounted for Carter’s narrow victory over Gerald R. Ford. Lower-income and less well-educated voters, who normally identify with the Democratic Party, are not as likely to vote as higher-income and better-educated voters, who are more likely to favor the Republican Party.

Changing Circumstances. In 1960 Richard Nixon was the odds-on favorite to beat John F. Kennedy, but the first televised debate changed that. In 2008 what happens in Iraq and with the economy may turn the election one way or another. By early fall, if American policy in Iraq shows significant improvement and the economy recovers, Senator McCain could benefit.

Now, who do you think will win, Obama or McCain?