

## **Report: 2009 Annual Meeting of the UK American Politics Group**

### **Zim Nwokora**

Between January 3 and 5, 2009, the University of Oxford's Rothermere American Institute (RAI) and St Anne's College jointly hosted the annual meeting of the UK American Politics Group (APG). APG is the leading forum connecting scholars throughout the United Kingdom who work on American politics. To mark the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the conference opened at the RAI with a fascinating lecture by Oxford's Rhodes Professor of American History, Richard Carwardine, that probed the unique pressures on Lincoln's presidency. As in previous years, the 2009 conference featured a broad range of papers that examined American foreign policy, change and continuity in governing institutions and processes, and the political aspects of American culture. Additionally, a number of contributions examined closely both the subtle and striking characteristics of Barack Obama's 2008 election victory.

Early in the conference a roundtable session featured general reflections on the 2008 election by Alan Gitelson, Stephen Medvic and Philip Davies. Carl Pedersen's conference paper focused on the complexities of Barack Obama's identity, and how it framed his strategy and the tactics of his opponents. In his paper entitled 'Barack Obama and the South', Charles Bullock used extensive exit poll data to look at the sources of Barack Obama's impressive performances in the South, a region traditionally associated with prejudice against black candidates. Obama won more electors than any Democratic nominee since 1976. Bullock found that race probably played some role in dampening Obama's support in white-dominated states, but increased participation of black voters provided the backbone of his Southern support.

While the 2008 election was the focus of much of the discussion at the conference and some of the papers, earlier American elections also featured in a panel on electoral politics. Keith Nottle looked at the dimensions of James Baker's involvement in the 1992 election; and both Joe Merton and Zim Nwokora looked at the 1976 election. Merton's paper examined the growth and decline of different forms of 'white ethnicity' in the period immediately prior to the election. Nwokora's research looked at the sources of Reagan's surprisingly strong challenge of President Gerald Ford in the 1976 Republican primary contest.

Three papers examined public policy themes. Tom Lubbock tested for the relationships between direct democracy institutions, and especially the initiative and changes in abortion policy in states. Lubbock found that legislators are more responsive to their constituents than the threat of an initiative. Using public opinion data and a series of recent Supreme Court cases, Andrew Moran considered whether the United States was changing its position on the death penalty. He found that, although there has been a gradual decline in its use, it remains popular and the Supreme Court does not view it to be 'cruel or unusual punishment' for some crimes. Edward Ashbee and Alex Waddan presented a paper entitled 'The Democrats and the Politics of Trade', which focused on role of issue framing as a supplementary explanation to established economic interest arguments in order to explain Democrat votes on trade policy.

Religion and politics was another prominent theme in the conference. Martin Durham's paper 'Evangelicals and the 2008 election' looked at the attempts by Republican candidates to woo the party's evangelical bloc. Corina Petronela Untea looked at the more general connections between religion and American political institutions.

A number of papers focused on American political institutions. In 'The Economic Presidency: Past and Present' Iwan Morgan examined presidential leadership in economic policy, and offered thoughts on the likely patterns of presidential involvement in economic policy-making during the Obama presidency. Gunnar Grendstadt rigorously examined some of the hypotheses posited by Stephen Skowronek in his classic text *The Politics Presidents Make*. The panel on bureaucratic politics featured papers that considered the relationships between the military and its civilian leadership (Brian Waddell) and the modern FBI (Adam Svendsen). In his paper 'Dual Insurance Regulation', also part of the bureaucratic politics panel, Joseph Zimmerman examined the effects of different models of state regulation of the insurance industry.

Other themes that were considered by conference participants included San Francisco Politics (Bill Issel); America's Vietnam Intelligence Operation (Yukiko Ochiai); the National Endowment for Arts (Karen Heath); and a number of prominent American politicians: Charles Brannan, Secretary of Agriculture (1948-53) (Daniel Wood); Spiro Agnew, Vice President (1969-73) (Robert Mason), and current Vermont senator Bernie Sanders (Rhodri Jeffrys-Jones). For some of the papers that were presented at the conference please see [the APG website](#).

A programme structured by two parallel sessions ensured both a limited choice to participants and healthy attendance at each panel. Participants benefited from some of the unique character and facilities that St Anne's can provide for such events. The new Ruth Deech Building comfortably housed the main programme of paper presentations. Conference participants were treated to delicious food throughout their stay, and the formal dinner on the first evening was excellent even by the high standards of the College catering staff. With most conferees choosing to stay in a College room, they experienced a dose of the communality that is familiar to the regular residents of Rayne, Wolfson, and Claire Palley buildings.

The APG conference has a strong tradition of encouraging participation by graduate students from History, Politics and American Studies departments. And for ten students from a number of European universities, APG offered opportunities for them to present parts of their research in a constructive and supportive environment. Joe Merton, a DPhil History student from Balliol College, presented an especially promising paper entitled 'The 1976 Presidential Election and Ethnicity', and was awarded the Richard Neustadt prize for best paper by a graduate student presented at the conference.

There was also plenty of action behind the scenes. Dr Nigel Bowles, Director of the Rothermere American Institute and Balfour Fellow in Politics at St Anne's, played the lead role in pulling together the academic and logistical dimensions of the conference. Dr Bowles had selected the papers and presenters, compiled the conference programme and liaised with College to secure rooms for the conference and accommodation for attendees. I supported Dr Bowles's efforts by working with individual participants and the St Anne's conference staff to ensure that the small number of potential knots in communication, administration and accommodation were anticipated and managed. The professionalism of the St Anne's conference team made these tasks much more straightforward than they would otherwise have been. During the conference itself, Dr Bowles and I benefited greatly from the energy of Eleanor Thompson who helped us to deal with minor tasks as the conference proceeded.

It seems that the conferees enjoyed their stay in College – by unanimous vote at its General Meeting the APG resolved to return to Oxford and St Anne's in 2010!

