

# The U.S. Midterm Elections The Weight of Foreign Policy

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Reuters/Jason Reed

The newly elected Democratic members of Congress on the Capitol steps.

As the readers of *Voices of Mexico* already know, the Democratic Party wrested control of both houses of the U.S. Congress from the Grand Old Party in the November 7 midterm elections. I offer here a preliminary reflection about three aspects of that election: the unprecedented importance of the foreign policy agenda in their development and outcome; the possible impact of the new legislative balance of forces on the U.S. strategy in Iraq; and their probable influence on U.S. immigration policy. Finally, using a constructivist focus,

I propose some thoughts for understanding the origins and significance of the result.

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA

Certainly, a comprehensive explanation of the election results must be sought in a complex combination of factors and processes, including corruption scandals and other forms of immoral behavior on the part of Republican congresspersons and individuals linked to them, the general state of the economy, local political agendas, etc. However, I would like to focus on the unprece-

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dent impact of foreign policy issues, particularly the war in Iraq, on the results.

Several weeks before the balloting, different analysts pointed out that it would be decided by foreign policy issues and not by traditional matters like employment, education, social security, etc. They also talked about specific races that the Republicans would easily win if the election had centered on the incumbents' performance in each state or district or on local political, economic or social agendas. However, in a different scenario, unusual for a midterm election, it was clear that a good number of Republican seats were in serious danger because the Iraq war

Iraq war as the center of the Republican campaign in an attempt to demonstrate that the voters had a choice between Republican firmness or Democratic weakness.<sup>2</sup> Until the very last minute, Bush continued to present the elections as the moment for deciding between "staying the course" in Iraq or "surrendering to the terrorists."

As Council on Foreign Relations analyst Michael Moran says, the number of presidential elections—not to mention midterm elections—that have been directly and significantly affected by matters of foreign policy can be counted on one hand. International affairs have been important in other votes, but not to the degree of being the decisive

important in the electoral debate: U.S. immigration policy. A few weeks before the voting, the debate about immigration reform, together with the war, both linked to security, seemed to be one of the key issues that took foreign policy to the heart of the debate. However, after a sweeping majority of legislators from both parties approved building a fence along the Mexican border, immigration began to lose importance in the congressional races. Probably the fact that the party divide between Republicans ("firm") and Democrats ("weak") had blurred on the issue of border security and the flow of undocumented immigrants "neutralized" the issue, making it less important to the electoral debate.

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and President Bush's corresponding low approval ratings were becoming the dominant factor.

While increasing numbers of Republican candidates were trying to center the electoral debate on local issues and trying to shake off the shadow of White House foreign policy, their Democratic opponents underlined the president and the Republican Congress's inability to run the war properly.

Bush's low approval ratings and the war became a dead weight for his party.<sup>1</sup> We should remember that, paradoxically, it was the president himself who initially led the electoral debate to the field of foreign policy by introducing the "war against terror," security and the

factor in legislative elections.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the 2006 balloting will go down in history as the first midterm elections largely determined by foreign policy issues.

Naturally, a fundamental element in attempting to explain this unprecedented process are the September 11 terrorist attacks. More concrete factors, however, seem to be the increasingly imminent civil war in Iraq, the growing number of "black bags," the uncertainty about the duration of U.S. presence there and the recent intelligence report that concludes that the war has increased and not reduced the United States' vulnerability to possible terrorist attacks.

Another issue with a strong foreign policy dimension was also initially very

## 2. THE ELECTORAL OUTCOME AND THE FUTURE OF U.S. STRATEGY IN IRAQ

As has already been suggested, this election was a kind of referendum on President Bush's performance, particularly regarding the war, in terms of staying or changing its course.

It seems evident that the November 7 electoral results show that the majority of the American people want a "change of course." However, what is not clear is what that change should consist of. It is clear that there is no consensus among the Democrats themselves about what this means: immediate withdrawal and leaving the Iraqis to fend for themselves? Scheduling a progressive withdrawal? Or the political-administrative decentralization of Iraq and the establishment of autonomous regions?

As Republicans have denounced, up until now, the Democratic position

on Iraq has consisted simply of criticizing the situation and underlining Bush's inability to guarantee a favorable outcome for the United States; that is, they have not proposed a specific alternative. As Michael Moran said, "Democrats continue to struggle to sound anything but negative on Iraq."<sup>4</sup>

In any case, the central responsibility for defining the Iraq strategy continues to fall to the executive branch, despite the new Democratic majority in Congress. As analyst James Lindsay, director of the University of Texas Robert S. Straus Center, has observed, "Presidents have considerable leeway in foreign policy. Congress can criticize, Congress can fund, Congress can provoke, but at the end of the day when it comes to troop deployment, it's going to be George Bush's call to make."<sup>5</sup>

The president has recognized that he is not satisfied with the way the war is going and that he is open to considering all kinds of options, including what the Democrats might propose. In addition, Donald Rumsfeld's resignation and the appointment of Robert Gates as the new secretary of defense suggest that the White House, in effect, is preparing a "change of course." However, we will have to wait to see what it consists of: if the U.S. military presence in Iraq increases or decreases; if the preparation of Iraqi security forces is sped up or not; if a plan for gradual withdrawal is decided on or not; if Iran and Syria are involved, etc.<sup>6</sup>

In the next two years we will probably see the establishment of congressional committees to investigate the irregularities in the decision-making process that led to the Iraq invasion and the awarding of contracts to big U.S. consortia there. It is unlikely, however, that the threat by some Democratic

congresspersons to bring impeachment proceedings against the president will come to fruition.

In any case, any change in policy will be the result of a strategy defined not on the Hill, but by the executive, probably along the lines of the conclusions the Iraq Study Group, coordinated by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, have come to.

### 3. THE ELECTION OUTCOME AND IMMIGRATION POLICY

In the months prior to the election, a stronger isolationist or protectionist position began to take shape in Congress

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with regard to different issues, including immigration. It is important to remember that the Democratic ranks include a foreign policy current that could be called isolationist, particularly regarding the economy, which implies not only a rejection of the country's economic opening, but also of using foreign labor. In fact, as Lindsay says, a large number of Democratic representatives waged their campaigns on an isolationist platform of this kind.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is also relevant to recall that a good number of the new Democratic members of the House clearly tend to be conservative. So, the question is up to what point these "conservative Democrats" have closed or inflexible positions on immi-

gration. Even though President Bush's discourse on immigration coincides on certain points with the proposals made by influential Democratic congresspersons, particularly with regard to defining a process to legalize currently undocumented workers and implementing a guest workers program, we cannot automatically conclude that there will be better opportunities for a comprehensive immigration reform over the next two years. Undoubtedly, Democratic members of Congress already have their eyes on 2008, so they will be extremely cautious and will not seek to stretch their mandate beyond what is electorally necessary and prudent. On the other hand, it could be argued that

the approval of the border fence and its effect on the recent election outcome suggests that a hard line on border control was well received by U.S. voters. For that reason, it would seem prudent to be cautious in our analysis about the possibilities for comprehensive immigration reform and not overestimate the effects of the Democratic victory in Congress.

### 4. SECURITY, THE IRAQ WAR AND IMMIGRATION POLICY: A CONSTRUCTIVIST FOCUS

After the 9/11 attacks, U.S. domestic policy underwent a process of growing

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“internationalization.” Of course, a broad, profound link between domestic and international policy is nothing extraordinary in the case of a superpower. However, it is important to note that after 9/11, the relationship between what happens in the United States and the rest of the world has broadened out and deepened. The situation in Iraq was a defining factor in the midterm elections, while the outcome will be equally important in deciding what will happen there. We could venture different explanations about this process of growing “intermesticity” of politics in today’s world.<sup>8</sup> However, I would like to underline the role of the Bush administration emphasis on security and the “war against terror.” The security discourse proposed by Bush and his team, but subsequently adopted by most of the political class and U.S. society, redefined U.S. interests and the means for procuring them: unilateralism, preventive wars, limiting individual liberties, building fences, etc. Electoral races, as a central aspect of the democratic decision-making process in a representative, liberal system, are spaces *par*

*excellence* for (re)defining a political community’s perception of “reality.” However, the recent elections, as a space for the social construction of U.S. interests, did not substantially change the “securitization” of the U.S. agenda. They seriously questioned some of the means for achieving it, mainly unilateralism and the doctrine of preventive action, but they did not bring into doubt that security is today the United States’ main interest. The election outcome will have an impact on the way the U.S. intervention in Iraq is being handled, but it will not necessarily change the course of immigration policy. A radical change in this sphere will not simply come from changing the balance of forces in Congress—or the White House for that matter—but from a transformation of the vision of the majority of U.S. social and political actors about immigrants’ political, economic, social and cultural role and the best way of controlling and ordering their flow. Nevertheless, while security dominates the U.S. collective imaginary, it is not very likely that we will see important changes of this kind. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Analyst Jeff Greenfield spoke of “Bush’s reverse coattail,” that is the president’s downward pull on his party’s candidates. “Greenfield: GOP tripping over Bush’s ‘reverse coattails,’” CNN International.com, November 1, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The reader will remember that Republican firmness had surfaced just before the election campaigns in bills they introduced dealing with military tribunals for judging accused terrorists and the program for surveillance of conversations and other communications between suspected terrorists.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Moran, “Election Will Turn on Foreign Policy,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 3, 2006. See also Robert McMahon, “Foreign Policy and the U.S. Midterm Elections,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 27, 2006 at <http://www.cfr.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Moran, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, “Lindsay: Bush, Democrats Likely to Look for New Approach to Iraq from Baker-Hamilton Commission,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 9, 2006, at <http://www.cfr.org/>

<sup>6</sup> In January, before this issue went to press, George Bush announced his strategy proposals for Iraq, including among other things, an increase in troop strength of 20,000. [Editor’s Note].

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> See Bayless Manning’s classic article, “The Congress, the Executive and Intermestic Affairs: Three Proposals,” *Foreign Affairs* 55, no. 2, 1977, pp. 307-324.

