

Toward the Consolidation Of Neoconservatism in the U.S.

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Mannie García/Reuters

Victory.

In an article published in issue 68 of *Voices of Mexico*, I wrote that much more was at stake in the 2004 U.S. presidential elections than a simple change of party. From my perspective, after George W. Bush's first election and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, if the Republicans won again, the neoconservative revolution would begin to consolidate. If the Democrats won, there would be an attempt to recover the

advances in civil rights and liberties that were fought for in the 1960s and that have been dismantled little by little. Today we can say that, in effect, the result of the November 2 election is the beginning of the consolidation of the so-called neoconservative revolution.

George W. Bush was reelected with the greatest number of popular votes in the history of the United States, more than 60 million, in addition to beating his Democratic rival by a wide margin of more than 3 million votes

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and 286 votes in the Electoral College against John Kerry's 252. Also, the Republicans consolidated their congressional majority, dominating both houses. The Senate has 55 Republicans, 44 Democrats and one independent. In the House of Representatives, the Republicans occupy 231 seats and the Democrats 200. Today, there are 28 Republican governors and 22 Democrats. Without a doubt, what we are witnessing is a political realignment which has been going on since the time of Ronald Reagan, with a single Democratic interlude, the presidency of William Clinton, whose ideology we could classify as center-of-the-road.

Undoubtedly, all these electoral figures have been read by President Bush as a mandate to continue along the path paved by his policies. It is important to point out that in order to implement them, he will not have to deal with a divided Congress, since he will have his party's support. Nothing leads us to think that he will try to unify the United States, since his reading of the situation reaffirms that a majority of the population approves both his domestic and his foreign policies. From now on, he has two years to implement his policies with no limits, or in the best of cases with few restrictions, before the next congressional elections in 2006.

WHY DID BUSH WIN?

The first point to be made about the recent elections is that they showed society to be deeply divided. It could be argued that this is nothing new given that the previous election had been decided by a single vote in the Supreme Court and only about 500 highly con-

tested votes in Florida, the state that gave the Republicans the majority in the Electoral College. However, we should remember that in those elections the threat to U.S. democracy actually came from the many voters who believed that their votes would not make a big difference. Also, the two parties' platforms were very similar and balloting was more influenced by the candidates' personalities and the effectiveness of the campaigns than by big differences in programmatic proposals.

The two strongest candidates in 2000, George W. Bush and Al Gore, fought over the ideological center without presenting clear alternatives. This means that initially the population was not really divided, but that it polarized later because of the dirty way the elections were carried out.

In contrast, the 2004 civic exercise did reveal a profoundly divided society.

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The candidates' positions clearly went to the extremes. As a result, 51 percent of the population felt better represented by an eminently conservative party and 48 percent by one with a broad liberal bent. The former is in favor of the war with Iraq and the latter expresses serious doubts about it. The former supports so-called preventive war as a foreign policy strategy and the latter is in favor of international mul-

tilateral institutions. The Republicans condemn abortion and the Democrats defend it as a victory for women. The former see gay marriage as an attack on the traditional family while the latter want to recognize homosexuals' right to legalize their relationships. The former are totally against stem cell research, while the latter want it to be done for primarily medical reasons.

These are not small differences; they are indications of a huge polarization. Although U.S. institutions are solid enough to handle it, the breach that the war has created is undoubtedly a serious threat to social cohesion.

It is important to emphasize that this Republican victory runs counter to one of the traditional axioms of electoral politics: that the electorate votes according to the state of its wallet. George W. Bush inherited a U.S.\$236 billion surplus from Bill Clinton, and today the country has a more than U.S.\$400 billion deficit. Almost a million jobs have been lost, unemployment is at 5 percent and indicators of economic recovery are barely showing up. It is clear that 80 percent of those who voted thinking about the economic situation favored the Democratic candidate.

The election was also not decided by a public perception of crisis, times when Americans traditionally tend to close ranks around their president. Despite being a country at war, this did not mark the electoral trends. Although 86 percent of those who said their vote was for a war against terrorism voted for Bush, this was not the main driving force behind the electorate's choice.

The real driving force behind these elections was something much more profound: a concern about American values. It was the social issues that

¿HOW DID THE U.S. POPULATION VOTE?	
SECTORS OF THE POPULATION THAT BUSH WON	
Men (in general)	55 %
White men	62 %
White women	55 %
With over \$200,000 in income	63 %
Non-unionized	54 %
Housewives	63 %
Without college degree	53 %
SECTORS OF THE POPULATION THAT KERRY WON	
Women (in general)	51 %
Non-white men	61 %
Non-white women	75 %
African-Americans	88 %
Latinos	53 %
With less than \$15,000 in income	63 %
Unionized	61 %
Homosexuals	77 %
With college degree	49 %

brought the voters out in numbers unheard of since the 1960s. It was precisely the aforementioned extreme positions that caused a high electoral participation. Approximately 125 million people voted, a figure as high as 1968. The Democrats naively thought that a higher number of voters would benefit them, but it was the religious groups that achieved the president's reelection.

The grand architect of the Republican campaign strategy was the neo-conservative Karl Rove, who visualized the importance of mobilizing the different churches of the conservative right in the United States, which did not participate actively in the 2000 elections. He was so successful that preachers urged the different religious groups to get out the vote and they spent a great deal of money in promoting it.

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They did not concretely come out for one candidate or the other, but they did propose that people vote in favor of the values and positions that they defended.

In my view, the three most important issues of the 2004 election were the vote against gay marriage, abortion and stem cell research, all controversial matters of utmost importance for religious groups. These issues were put

to the vote in 11 states and defeated in all of them.

The Republican campaign message was oriented directly to the churches and religious unions. The important thing was to mobilize the party rank and file. Eighty percent of those who voted based on moral values supported Bush. The point to emphasize here is that together with the economy and the war, moral values were the most important cause of the very high participation of U.S. voters.

While it is true that the Kerry campaign targeted young people and he got their vote, the percentage of participation of this group did not increase significantly compared to 2000 (17 percent), while white regular churchgoers increased their participation, making a big difference. White men and women went to the polls to support Bush and defend their values.

Regionally, the Midwest, including Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota, and the South went to the Democrats, except New Mexico, as did the West Coast, from California to Washington. Clear divisions can be seen both regionally and in the composition of the electorate.

In his famous journey to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville perceived a great wall between church and state. However, today, that division seems to be breaking down. In their defense, however, the leaders of these churches argue that what the founding fathers did not want was the imposition of a national church, but that they saw no problem in the proliferation and political participation of the different churches.

However, it is obvious that religion and politics are today deeply intertwined in the United States.

The consequences will begin to be felt in the revocation of certain rights such as being allowed to get an abortion with qualified medical assistance, considered one of women's victories. On the other hand, the war has made for a roll-back of many civil rights: jailings without trial, and the violation of privacy such as the government controlling and spying on citizens' reading materials by forcing libraries to hand over information about the books and issues consulted, particularly those associated with Arab and radical Muslim movements. These apparently exceptional kinds of measures increase daily, strengthening the neoconservative revolution. All the limits that the democratic society had managed to set on security agencies with regard to secret missions, unexplained budgets and espionage seem to have been turned around, and we will see even more steps backward in this sphere.

Perhaps it is in foreign policy where this position is expressed most forcefully. In contrast with traditional conservatives, the neoconservatives propose what they call an active foreign policy. They were born as opponents to Soviet excesses and today point to radical Islamic groups as their main enemy. Unlike conservatives, the neoconservatives have well structured academic and theoretical positions for every issue.

Charles Krauthammer, one of their most important exponents, thinks that it is incorrect to talk about just a period with a single pole worldwide. He thinks that we should talk about an entire era, and proposes democratic globalism. He understands democracy as a useful instrument for achieving security and stability, but he suggests intervening only in those countries that represent fundamental interests. Thus,

his ideology is different from Wilsonian idealism, which talks about the promotion of democratic values, by proposing a pragmatic idealism according to which you should not intervene simply to promote democracy as an ideal, but only in those places which are considered of great interest for the United States, and to do so only when it can serve as a weapon in the fight against the identified enemy: Arab-Islamic radicalism. Obviously, he also considers the economic interests centered in the oil deposits in the region. In addition, he supports Israel as the most important consolidated democracy in the area. Lastly, he justifies preventive war to eliminate possible threats and questions the legitimacy of the international community that criticizes U.S. actions. Favoring his position is the fact that many dangers are not perceived as such in the beginning, such

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as in the case of Adolf Hitler. In his opinion, despite the problems with Iraq, the war has not been a total failure: although the situation is difficult, it could have been worse. He thinks that while no nuclear weapons or laboratories for biochemical warfare were found, the world is better off without Saddam Hussein.

The problem with this vision is that we can easily imagine a not very pro-

mising future with possible preventive attacks aimed at Iran or North Korea. We must ask ourselves when the so-called preventive wars will end and what the limit on this strategy is. This also leads us to ask how advanced democracy is in these regions, or up to what point instability and hunger cultivate terrorism. In the meantime, resentment toward the United States continues to grow in the region.

Because the United States is the world's largest economic and military power, I think that the only possible limit to its unbridled unilateralism must come from within, from the heart of that divided society that is beginning little by little to show some discontent. Undoubtedly this will grow in direct proportion to the number of U.S. soldiers who die in combat, a total of 1,279 in early December 2004.

In addition, inside the U.S. political right itself there are important divisions that could blossom with time. This must be taken into account together with an economy that is not giving indications of taking off or recovering. It is important to emphasize that the so-called conservative right does not support an active foreign policy. What is more, some propose a return to isolationism and protectionism. Others are very concerned with the deficit and fearful of the growth and power of the state.

At bottom, both liberals and conservatives mistrust a greater activism of the administration that can threaten their freedom, both economic and on issues of civil rights.

Very probably it will be precisely this domestic discontent that will once again put limits on the government's unbridled actions in the domestic sphere and in foreign policy. ■■■