

# The 2004 U.S. Elections A View from Mexico

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Rick Wilking/Reuters

Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell celebrate the win.

An incumbent president who seeks re-election when his country is at war practically has victory guaranteed. The closeness of the electoral debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry and the poll results until the very end is a reflection of the fact that the United States is a profoundly divided nation. Despite this, the outcome favored not only the president but also the Republican Party. In that sense, we can speak of the consolidation of a conservative majority and the validation of the Bush administration's domestic and foreign policies.

Going beyond a specific analysis of the electoral results and the media clichés about the moral “issues”—which can include everything and anything—it is worthwhile asking what the deep causes of this surprising result are, a result that flies in the face of public opinion in the rest of the world. That opinion went from a feeling of solidarity and empathy with the American people after the September 11 attacks to a profound anti-Americanism reflected in opinion polls according to which, if the majority of the world's inhabitants had voted, John Kerry would be the president of the United States.

It is appropriate here to remember two periods in the history of that nation that can shed light on what is happening today: the end of the

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nineteenth century and the 1950s. Both times suffered from underlying fears: in the first, the fear of domestic change and the “other” that was already inside the United States; in the second, it was the increasing fear of the Cold War enemy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, like today, the U.S. economy and society had gone through very rapid changes. The rise of the corporations questioned many of the basic tenets of U.S. political economy. During that time, as well, a great wave of migration created serious social problems, giving rise to a xenophobic movement. In addition, the process of urbanization had profoundly changed social customs and affected the agricultural sector, which gave rise to protest movements like populism. The countryside and the city were divided by a deep gap in values.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the United States went through equally profound changes. The end of the Cold War presupposes the exercise of hegemony with no counterweights; the process of globalization is headed up by the United States, but its effects are also felt in different economic and social sectors; the last census shows that there has been a wave of immigration similar to that at the end of the nineteenth century. In recent decades, U.S. society has witnessed the massive incorporation of women into productive life, at the same time that social values have liberalized with regard to homosexuality, abortion and race relations.

Many social sectors have suffered from these changes, just like at the end of the nineteenth century. They perceive them as a threat to a life-style that for many is by now only a myth they cling to desperately. In that sense,

Professor Samuel P. Huntington’s last book, *Who We Are*, is a sophisticated reflection of the fear of change, the fear of foreigners and of previously marginalized sectors of society.

These generalized fears have led to the strengthening of conservative groups both inside and outside the Republican Party and have transformed the electoral map of the United States. This was seen at the polls thanks to an electoral system in which each district is won by a majority and in which the presidential election is indirect.

Despite the conservative victory, if we analyze the election results more closely, we will see that the Republicans

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only won by 3.5 million votes, and that John Kerry won in urban areas and among young people. However, in contrast with the end of the nineteenth century, when the Democratic machines in the North and East were able to incorporate the new immigrants, this time the Republicans were able to divide the Hispanic minority. This could create a new trend that will strengthen the conservative electoral coalition even more. One of the most interesting new aspects of these elections, a phenomenon that could change the political future of the United States, was the inclination of Hispanic voters for the Republican Party.

Although the Bush family has not managed to hook up with the majority of the Afro-American electorate, we can say that it could be the main architect of a new orientation for a fundamental part of U.S. Hispanics. The Bushes have contributed importantly to the Republican Party understanding that the United States is increasingly a nation of nations and that, in that context, Hispanics play a very important role because they are the largest minority. If the party consolidates its dominion over the Cuban minority and adds to that between 40 and 50 percent of the rest of the Hispanic community, it would be able to create an almost invincible new electoral coalition. For that reason, President Bush has been consistent in naming Hispanics for the highest posts they have ever occupied in the public administration, such as the Attorney General’s Office and the Department of Commerce.

#### SHADES OF THE 1950S

The fear of change is reflected in the strengthening of conservative social sectors; after the September attacks, it fused with the fear of presumed enemies in the United States, manifested at other times in its history, like during McCarthyism.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger said that during the 1950s the United States had become incredibly prosperous but that people were afraid of communists and of anything that questioned prevailing ideas, customs or leaders. He said that the U.S. population lived under a heavy cloud, humorless, sanctimonious, foolish, and singularly lacking in irony and self-crit-

icism. He thought that the climate of the late 1950s was probably the most boring and depressing in the nation's history.

If we replace the word "communist" with the word "terrorist", we would have a good description of the intellectual and moral climate prevalent in the United States today and that explains, in part, the election outcome.

That climate is also related to the one that existed at the beginning of the Vietnam War when, just like today in Iraq, the conflict was escalating without anyone imagining how big it would become. In 2004, despite the fact that people thought that the war in Iraq would play a fundamental role, the voters developed a peculiar blind spot about the growing disaster and voted according to their innermost fears.

In addition, the Democratic Party has not been able to articulate an alternative vision. It was able to occupy the White House with President William Clinton thanks to his political genius and also to the fact that he was able to take over the Republican discourse, pushing political debate in the United States further and further to the right.

It was interesting that there were two types of campaigns around John Kerry: one led by the party and another led by the groups and social organizations who were against Bush but retained a critical attitude toward a party surrounded by Republicans, hounded by the accusation —like in the 1950s— that whoever is against the president's policies is anti-American.

Thus, despite growing Republican conservatism, and given the lack of an

alternative Democratic vision, it is possible to predict protest movements against the Bush administration and above all against the war in Iraq that will go against the current of the dominant political climate.

#### DOMESTIC POLICY

Although the president appealed for unity and bipartisanship immediately after his electoral win, his actions and nominations to his new cabinet point to the consolidation of a partisan, unilateral policy, both domestically and abroad.

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From the political point of view, building a permanent electoral coalition that supports the Republican majority is a strategic task of both presidential advisor Karl Rove, the architect of the president's victory, and the party. In matters of public policy, the electoral results are going to allow the president to consolidate conservative slants on nominations to the judiciary and economic and foreign policy.

Despite the budget deficits and the enormous costs of the war in Iraq, the Bush administration has announced its intention of continuing tax cuts, above all for corporations, and privatization of social security funds.

It is very possible that the Republican administration will be able to stamp a consistently conservative orientation on all three branches of government, including the judiciary. In the case of the Supreme Court, given the age and ailing health of some of the judges, President Bush will be able to change the relationship of forces by only naming two, since in recent times many of the court's decisions have been made with a vote of five to four. This could change the orientation of the court for decades and reverse decisions about the right to abortion, prayer in schools and other important issues. In addition, the Republicans may also be able to reorient the judiciary through the federal appeals courts, whose judges are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

With regard to environmental policy, a second Bush administration will increase its efforts to reverse the achievements of the Environmental Protection Agency, particularly with regard to opening up lands previously protected from corporate exploitation. In addition, it will continue the international policy inaugurated when the United States refused to sign the Kyoto protocol and will persist in ignoring scientists' warnings about climate change, which could have serious effects on the future of the environment, both of the U.S. and the world.

Most of the policy moves will be opposed by the Democrats and different social groups. However, the new Republican majority is going to have an enormous impact in all these areas since, despite the fact that 50 million Americans voted against these policies, the Republicans are already talking about a conservative mandate that legitimizes their decisions.

## FOREIGN POLICY

Ignoring international public opinion and the opposition of many governments, the steps the president of the United States has taken, particularly naming Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, indicate that he will maintain the same course of action as during his first term. In that context, the priority will be policy on Iraq.

Along with the war, terrorism will be a fundamental item on the agenda both in domestic and foreign policy. The consequences of internal security measures will have to be monitored, going from the violation of Americans' individual liberties to scientific policy and the response to terrorist groups in coming months.

Europe, in particular is facing the dilemma of bending to U.S. policy or becoming a counterweight to it, which also would imply accepting the political and economic costs, costs that it does not seem ready to pay even if it does not seem to be happy with the U.S. election outcome. In that sense, it is possible to hope that the majority of countries adjust their expectations about their relationship with the United States, as happened in the 1980s during the Reagan administration.

Given the electoral results in Uruguay and Chile and the presence of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil, Latin America seems more inclined to swing to the left, although in very different conditions than the 1970s. Nevertheless, even the most timid re-

forms could enter onto a collision course with the Bush administration although for the moment Latin America is not one of the U.S.'s priorities.

Despite the opposition of almost half the electorate to the Bush administration, if the Republicans consolidate their electoral majority in the next elections and their political agenda in the three branches of governments and more than half the states, the 2004 election results may be felt for decades to come and change the course of U.S. politics. ■■

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Howard, *The Sixties* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), pp. 29-30.