

"A Primer on U.S. Presidential Elections"

U.S. presidential elections are always important, at least for the last 100 years or so. And they affect everyone throughout the world. The election of 2004 is an unusually tense one for several reasons. A larger percentage of the U.S. and the world's population believe it matters. The predictions are for an extremely close election. The sense of each side that they cannot afford to lose is quite evident.

To understand what's at issue, one must start by observing some structural features of U.S. presidential elections that make them different from the principal elections in just about every other country that has meaningful elections. The first thing is that the U.S. is a genuinely presidential system. That is, the U.S. does not elect a parliament which chooses a prime minister. It is not even semi-presidential, like France, where the ability of the president to govern is severely constrained if he does not also control the parliament. And the election has only one round of voting (again unlike France). Smaller parties cannot transfer their votes on a second round. This single feature explains why the U.S. has and must have a two-party system. The election of the president for a fixed term of four years is an all-or-nothing proposition. Therefore, if one doesn't construct a wide coalition to win it, one loses it. Third parties can throw an election to a party which otherwise would have a minority of the votes.

And, if this weren't enough to ensure that it was a two-party system, the U.S. has this curious relic of the eighteenth century, an electoral college system, where voters of each of the fifty states elect electors who in turn elect the president. The number of electors each state is equal to the number of members of the House of Representatives (more or less proportional to the population) plus two. The "plus two" provision ensures that smaller states have a slightly greater weight than larger states. And since the population of states is related to the concentration of persons in cities and their suburbs, the system gives greater weight to voters from rural areas and small towns. One consequence of this is that someone can be elected president with less overall votes than his opponent. This has happened several times, and most recently in 2000.

And there is a third structural feature. The laws of each state provide that a majority of the voters in that state choose *all* the electors of that state. This means that elections are only really important in those states in which the voting is close. In the current U.S. election, the contest is thought to be close in at most 19 of the 50 states, and really close in about seven. A small shift of voters in seven states can determine who will be the next president of the United States.

All this explains why the U.S. has two large parties, each of which is basically a coalition of different groups. Historically, the Democratic party was the party left of center and the Republican party the party right of center. This division reflected primarily economic issues: workers' rights, the welfare state, taxation policies. In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt was called by many Republicans "a traitor to his class" because, although he personally was from a wealthy, upper class family, he enacted the New Deal and supported the rights of unions to organize. This division over economic questions remains real, but has become somewhat secondary in the division of the two parties in the last twenty years.

The Democratic party has just held its convention to nominate John Kerry. All commentators agree that it was an exceptionally unified convention. There was hardly a dissenting voice

about anything. Those delegates who had reservations about Kerry kept them to themselves in a fervor to oust George W. Bush from the presidency. The tone of the convention was carefully monitored to utilize only themes that might appeal to the "undecided" voters in those key states which will decide the election.

One has to ask oneself what it is that made the Democrats show such unity. What is it that holds them together? It is not foreign policy. While the majority of the delegates and of Democratic voters think the war in Iraq was morally and politically wrong, this is not the position of Kerry or his close advisors, nor is this the official position of the Democratic party. Rather, Kerry argues that the war was conducted ineptly. The U.S. should have allowed the inspections to continue. The U.S. should have worked more closely with its traditional allies. And Kerry promises to do this now. He proposes to increase U.S. military strength, not withdraw from Iraq.

So what unifies the Democrats? Why are all the antiwar activists going to vote for Kerry, despite his position on Iraq, which even the *Washington Post*, a centrist newspaper, calls a "missed opportunity"? Is it economic issues? There are differences, no doubt, in this domain. But the Republicans seek to minimize the extent of the differences. And, unlike in 1936, the lines are not that strongly etched. In the Clinton years, there were no major advances in the welfare state. Rather, Clinton enacted so-called "welfare reform," which had long been a Republican program.

If the lines are blurred in foreign policy and economic policies, there is one domain in which the lines between the Democratic party and the Republican party today are indeed quite clear. This is the social domain, which has three components: multiculturalism, social liberalism, and the environment. In this domain, 95% of the Democrats are on one side and a large majority of the Republicans on the other side.

There is good reason why 90% of the Blacks and 70-80% of the Latinos vote Democratic. For all their frustration that the Democrats don't do enough to advance their rights still further, they know that the Republicans are working to undo the rights they have - supporting laws that disenfranchise them, opposing affirmative action, seeking to enact "English only" laws, and tightening (even closing) immigration flows from the non-White world.

As for social liberalism, the two principal issues that have divided Americans in the last twenty years or so - abortion (the single issue that accounts for the fact that women are more likely to vote Democratic than men) and the rights of homosexuals - once again place an overwhelming majority of Democrats on one side and a majority of the Republicans on the other. A third issue has now arisen, that of stem cell research. And this was dramatically raised by the speech of Ronald Reagan, Jr. at the convention, in which he called on the country to vote for stem-cell research (actively opposed by Bush and the Republican party). These issues of social liberalism are tied to the demand for "civil liberties" - today markedly threatened by the policies of Attorney-General Ashcroft and the Patriot Act.

And finally, the environment. This was a political issue invented by Republicans at the turn of the twentieth century. But most Republicans have long since abandoned this issue, and the Bush administration has spent its energy dismantling every advance the Clinton administration made in this arena.

And it is these social issues, not the foreign policy ones or the economic ones, that explain the importance to the voters of judicial appointments, and in particular those to the Supreme

Court and the nine Courts of Appeals. The Republican party is committed to naming judges who will be hostile to any extension of rights in these domains.

If the Democratic party wins the elections of 2004, it will be in large part because it has the enthusiastic, even the desperate, support of those who stand for these issues in the social domain. No doubt, it hopes to pick up some undecided voters by its positions on economic issues and another segment who are dismayed at Bush's foreign policies. But the unity of the Democratic party does not lie there. And the changes a Kerry administration would bring will be less notable in foreign policy or economic issues than in this social domain.

Immanuel Wallerstein