

The U.S. Elections More of the Same?

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Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

President Bush campaigning.

With the November elections, the Democrats lost out on any real possibility of controlling Congress, and the Republicans won the day as no one had thought they could. The Democrats will have to ask themselves about why they lacked political leadership and were unable to bring out their constituents, their lack of a political proposal in terms of national security and the scant ability of

their candidates to be reelected making use of the advantages the system gives them; first-time candidates in newly formed districts did not succeed either.

Only three presidents in history have won seats for their party in both houses of Congress in the same election: Democrats Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1934 and William Clinton in 1998, and this time, the only Republican, George W. Bush. Bush's campaign was the decisive element in the victory, since in a large part of the areas he visited in the

days preceding the November 5 balloting, the vote favored the Republicans.

The results prove that the U.S population is becoming more conservative both on foreign policy and domestic affairs; the Republican win consolidates political control that began seven years ago. Nevertheless, given the customs and rules in the legislative process, it is difficult to govern without making concessions to the minority party. The debates will be intense and each of the two hegemonic parties will try to push

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its political agenda and take advantage of the errors of its opponent to win the 2004 elections. While the votes in favor of President Bush's party lend support to his political agenda, he will have to sustain that political capital for the next two long years if he wants to be a strong candidate for reelection.

A REPUBLICAN CONGRESS

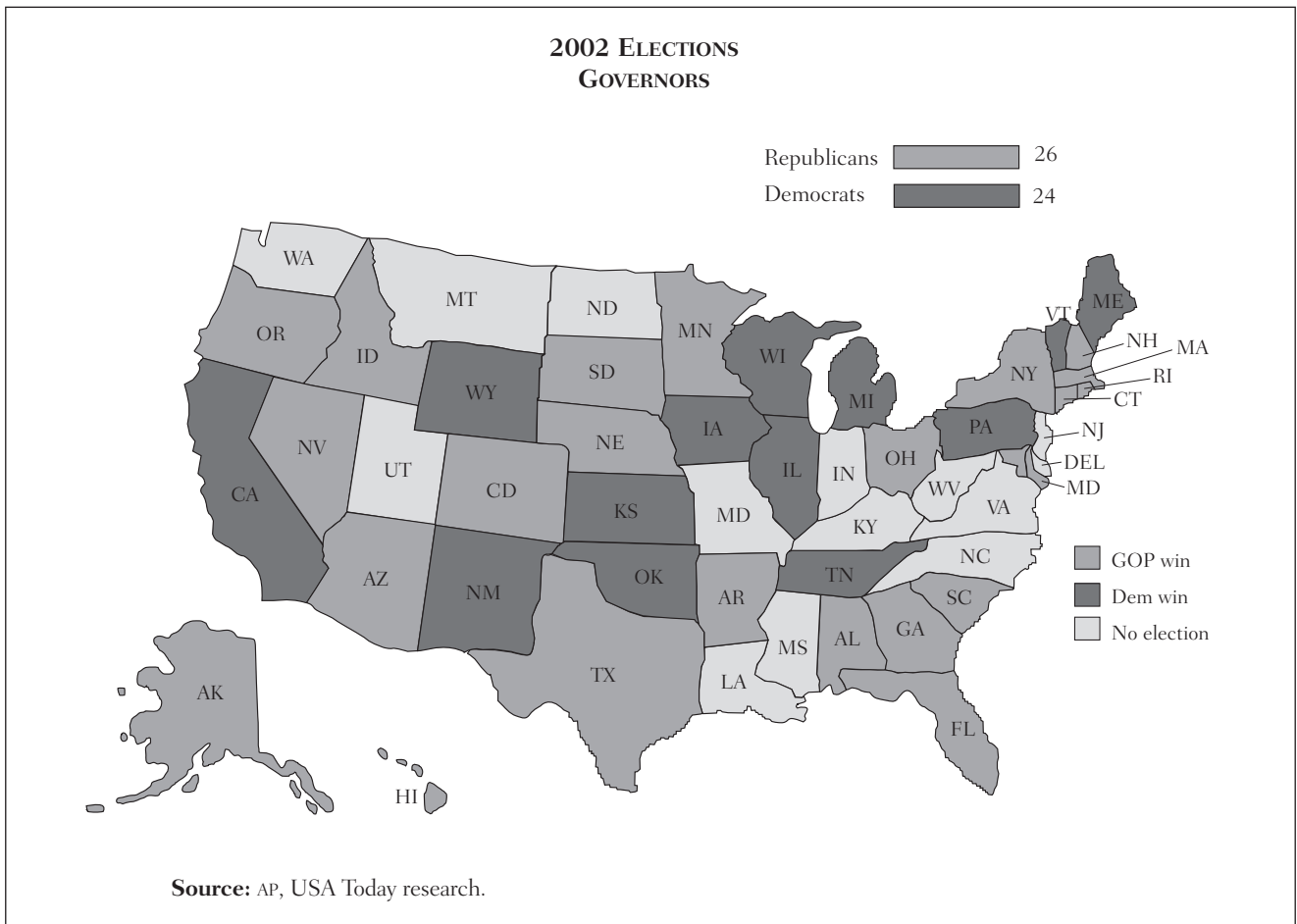
Before the elections, the Democratic Party had a priority: winning the Senate. Their hopes began to fade for unexpected reasons. In Minnesota, a key state because the race was so close,

their political circumstances were complicated last October by the death of their veteran candidate and the most progressive of their senators, Paul Wellstone, in an airplane accident together with his family and close aides. The emergency led them to ask 74-year-old former Vice President Walter Mondale to throw his hat in the ring. Nevertheless, he failed to save this decisive seat. Another equally unfortunate occurrence was the retirement of Robert Torricelli from New Jersey.

In part, this situation had an impact on the Republicans' getting better results than had been predicted. The advantages that the system gives incumbents are clear and contribute to not

changing the balance of forces in any dramatic or surprising way. For these elections, new districts were created thanks to a routine redistribution of boundaries carried out every 10 years. In addition, the Republican first-timers managed to defeat some veteran Democrats, although in several elections their winning margin was really minimal. These kinds of surprises also came on the Republican side. For example, popular Republican legislator Connie Morella, from Maryland, with a solid, liberal career in the House of Representatives, lost her district, although the other Republicans in her state won the day.

Defeat in three congressional elections in a row has led the Democrats to



the reelection of the president's brother, Jeb Bush. Florida and Texas are now bastions of the Bush dynasty.

The Democrats also failed in Alabama, where Bob Riley is now the third Republican governor in several decades; it should be noted that former Governor Don Siegelman declined a recount after a questionable outcome arguing that the time it would take—some observers talked about months—would seriously damage the public trust in state politics. This is another example of the ineffective, obsolete U.S. electoral machinery.

Another relevant and surprising case was Georgia, with a Republican victory both for the governorship and the state Senate, which they won complete control over on November 5.

HISPANIC LEGISLATORS

For the first time there will be two sisters among the Democratic Latino legislators: controversial, outspoken Loretta Sanchez and her younger sister Linda. A similar situation is that of Florida's Cuban-American community, where veteran legislator Lincoln Diaz-Balart—who has run unopposed in the last three elections—will be working with his younger brother Mario who defeated Cuban-American Democrat Linda Betancourt. Betancourt came out during her campaign in favor of opening up trade with Cuba, something completely unacceptable for the Diaz-Balart brothers.

Nineteen Hispanic legislators sought reelection; they all made it. Only Henry Bonilla (R-Texas) had a close race. The number of politicians of Hispanic origin even increased in the states where they have traditionally had a presence.

Now California will have two more Hispanic representatives and Florida and New Mexico one more each. Though the number of Hispanic legislators increased in the House, in the Senate, there continues to be none. The media talked a great deal about the electoral importance of Hispanics. However, the system is structured in such a way that groups politicized and organized for a long struggle for more political representation only manage to win small victories.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Republicans came out the winners in the November elections, which

Alabama where no winner had been declared because of irregularities in the voting process.

The existence of third parties still has not made a substantial difference. The participation of this minority of voters is far from being a real option for political change. Although in some places the two majority parties have to face a third-party candidate, particularly for Congress, they never make any headway. Their candidates get very low vote counts. On many occasions they only benefit the Republican candidates because they siphon votes away from the Democrats, such as when the third option is a green or libertarian party. The two hegemonic parties have man-

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means that the current administration will have more political room for advancing its agenda in all areas, using its anti-terrorist policy as the thin edge of the wedge.

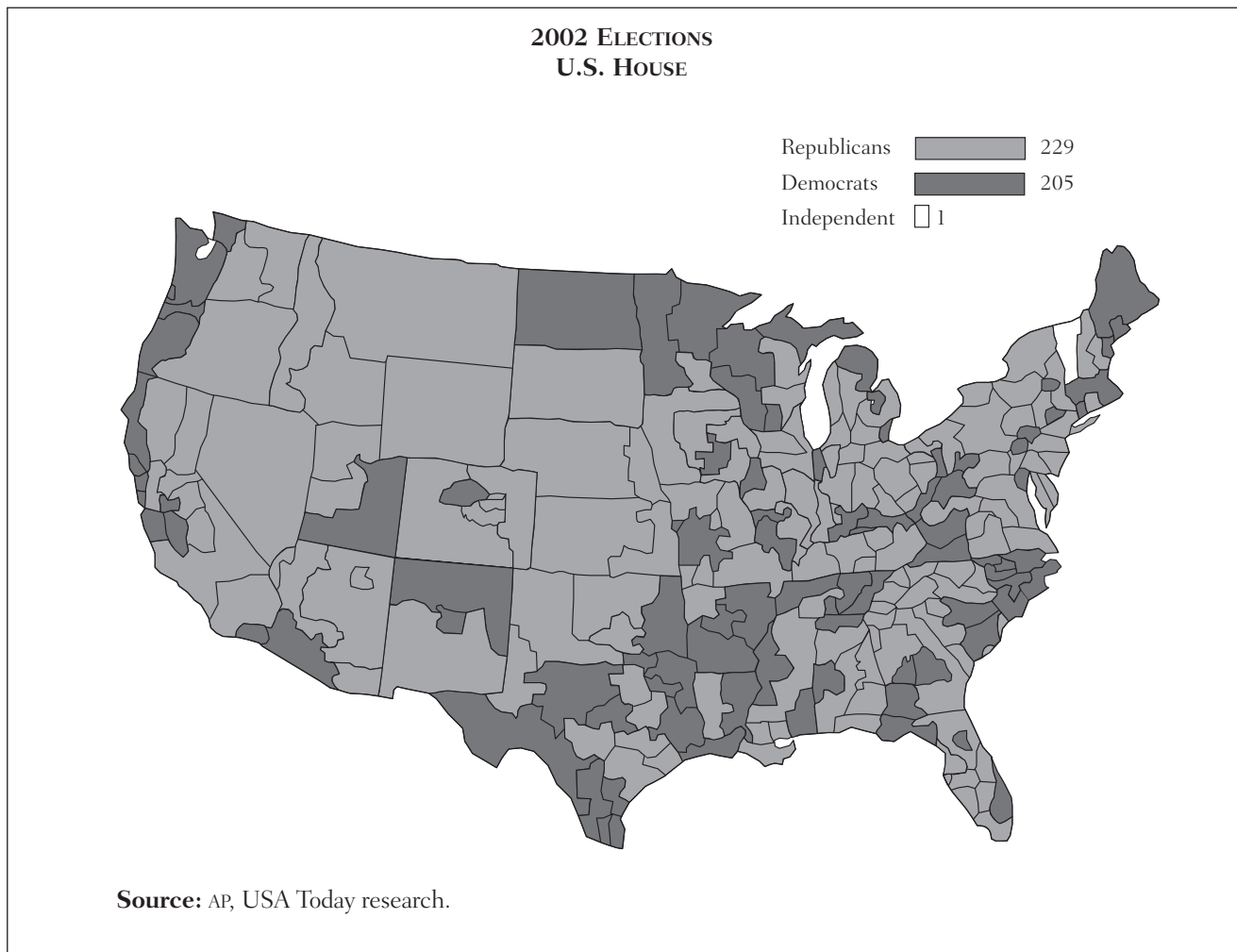
Competitive elections? For the two hegemonic parties only 18 districts were ever really in dispute. Most of the representatives who sought reelection won. Once again, abstentionism was high.

The participation of a great number of observers, the police guarding polling places and both parties' accusations of corruption and fraudulent vote counts are some signs of the bad shape the democratic political system of the United States is in. By November 12, there were still places like Ala-

aged to organize a countrywide campaign infrastructure that allows them to maintain an organized, convinced clientele. Thus, a participatory minority gives legitimacy to the bipartisan system, which though questioned because of high abstentionism, seems to erode only very, very slowly.

Campaign costs for the governorship of Texas and Florida were in the nine digits. According to the *Daily News*, they spent U.S.\$125 million. Money seems to be a determining factor in this polyarchic democracy.

The debate in the press about issues such as defense spending, civil liberties and less or more government almost always leaves out any profound cri-



tique of the defects of the political system.

What kind of government do U.S. voters want? Judging by the November 5 results, they want one that will guarantee their security after the September 11 attacks. The Republicans have proven that they have a clear project about what to do to ensure that security, even if the road they have chosen is a greater use of arms.

Having a less competitive electoral system for the past several decades is not a serious problem for the average U.S. citizen, and voters do not seem concerned about implementing impor-

tant changes in areas such as federal spending, restricting the time legislators can be in office, the enormous advantages that large corporations have for intervening in elections and their not always legal links to the political class that have been shown with the recent cases of corporate fraud in the United States. Reforms in these matters would undoubtedly damage the hegemony of the two parties and, given current political priorities, these issues are far from being at the top of the political agenda over the next two years.

Without a doubt, the voters generally leaned toward more support for a

strong state able to “face down” terrorism. In the future we will see how willing they are to reaffirm their belief in a Republican government and to exchange security for freedom. In the meantime, abstentionism was very high, as high or higher than in other elections, which confirms the scant public participation in politics. In this election, this seems to have negatively affected the Democrats. **MM**

NOTE

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