

2004: Elections that Will Define The United States

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde* María Fernanda Valencia**



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The Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primaries, both of them rural states par excellence, traditionally mark the start of the U.S. presidential elections (this year they

were held January 19 and 27, respectively). Both processes have historically been very important because they determine the future of the race. This time, with no competition against the incumbent, the Republican Party decided to back President Bush's bid for reelection. It has spent its time observ-

ing the Democratic primaries, attacking and responding to criticisms, and since February 23, began its formal campaign leading up to its August 30 New York convention.

In the Democratic Party nomination process, clear results began to emerge very quickly. John Kerry, senator for

* Director of CISAN.

** CISAN research assistant.

Massachusetts, went to the head of the pack with a strong advantage over his fellow contenders, surprisingly taking the lead from strident Howard Dean who had been the favorite until one day before Iowa. That is when candidates started dropping out: Richard Gephardt, Wesley Clark, Dean and finally John Edwards fell away after Kerry's resounding victory on Super Tuesday, March 2.¹

Kerry, a spokesman for northern liberalism, Vietnam veteran and hero, with 10 years congressional experience, thus became the shoo-in for the Democratic nomination.

So far, he has won 31 of the 39 state primaries held until now, guaranteeing him 1,895 delegates;² this, together with the 381 super-delegates who have come out for him, brings his total up to 2,162.³ Although this assures Kerry the nomination, it is a safe bet that the senator will continue with his campaign calendar to get the most possible support in the caucuses and primaries still to come before the June 26 Democratic convention in Boston.

Kerry's candidacy was strengthened by his image of "electability" among voters, who consider him the candidate with the greatest possibility of defeating Bush. He will probably continue to benefit from this and from most Democrats' tendency to sacrifice discussions about positions, platforms and personalities to defeating the Republicans.

MAIN PLAYERS

A month and a half after the race began, the finalists have already been decided: Bush and Richard Cheney are running mates again, and Kerry's vice presiden-

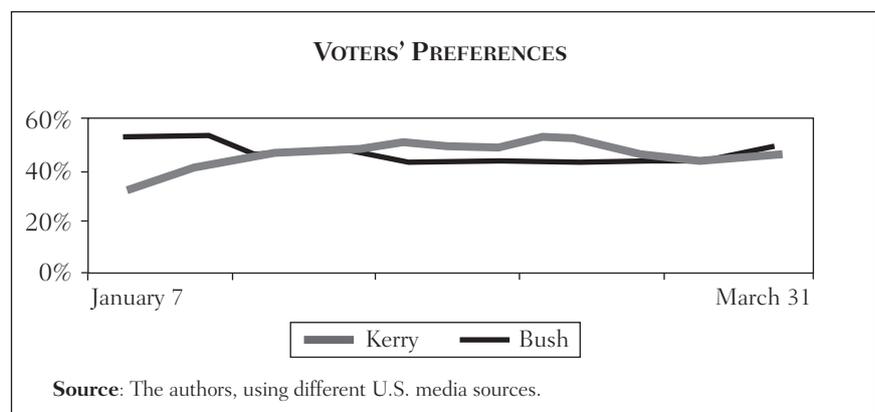
tial choice remains to be seen.⁴ Most of his followers think that the man with the greatest possibilities is Senator John Edwards (33 percent of those polled).⁵ The reasons Edwards seems to be a firm candidate for the Democratic vice presidential slot are: 1) He has won 534 delegates up to now;⁶ 2) He represents the southern vote; 3) His center-progressive stance on delicate issues like employment, social security and minority rights, among others, offer Kerry access to like-minded voters; 4) Last, but not least, in a system that puts a premium on personality, his charisma is an advantage for Kerry. Still others weigh in for Richard Gephardt, who would appease the party's protectionist wing that mistrusts Kerry's vote for the North American Free Trade Agreement a decade ago, and would win him support from poor and working people. Other running mates have been considered: for example, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who recently rejected the possibility,⁷ or either of the senators for Florida, Bob Graham or Bill Nelson. Senator Evan Bayh from Indiana and several governors, like Janet Napolitano from Arizona, Mark Werner from Virginia and Tom Voslack from Iowa, have also been considered in analysts' predictions.⁸

THE CANDIDATES' PROSPECTS

The prospects of both candidates seem very balanced. Until mid-March, Kerry was slightly ahead. Yet, the latest surveys show President Bush leading with 51 percent, while Kerry has 47 percent. Recent polls put the president's popularity at its lowest point since he took office. Kerry, in contrast, has strengthened his popular support.

However, Bush has lost credibility due to the questioning of his war against Iraq based on the supposed existence of arms of mass destruction. The suspicion that Bush lied has had a negative impact on his credibility in other areas, turning the war and foreign policy into a domestic issue. Recent criticism of Bush's strategy (such as Kay's, O'Neill's and Clarke's),¹⁰ the suspicions that Bush avoided serving in the Vietnam War by using his father's political influence and the cabinet's inability to coherently explain the matter of arms of mass destruction have brought into question the president's honesty and capability.

In addition, the economy presents an increasingly difficult panorama. Despite the fact that in President Bush's first year in office, employment increased 8.2 percent, since 2001, growth has stagnated according to the Labor



ELECTORAL ISSUES 2004	
GEORGE W. BUSH	JOHN KERRY
1. The war in Iraq and the fight against terrorism	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In favor. • Doctrine of preventive unilateral attack: invasion of Afghanistan, war in Iraq. • Does not support withdrawal of troops from Iraq. • In favor of the Patriot Act. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voted in favor, argues he was misled because he trusted the intelligence services. He is against the reconstruction budget. • Return to multilateralism. Use of force and preventive action (even unilateral) when necessary. • Does not support withdrawal of troops from Iraq. • Voted in favor of the Patriot Act; now promotes its repeal.
2. The economy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is optimistic about the current situation and does not think the budget deficit is important (says it is necessary and can be reversed). • Promises to create jobs. • Favors tax cuts and promotes making them permanent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticizes the current economic situation, particularly the deficit. • Promises to create jobs. • Opposes tax cuts, particularly for families with incomes over U.S.\$200,000.
3. Homosexual marriage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Against. Favors a constitutional amendment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Against. Favors civil unions. Opposes a constitutional amendment.
4. Free trade (NAFTA)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In favor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In favor, but with a renegotiation and protection for workers.
5. Education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports individual, tax-deductible contributions to public schools and the No Child Left Behind Program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes a community plan to help gifted high school students continue their education in university.
6. Health	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted MEDICARE. Favors private investment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticizes MEDICARE.
7. Migration	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed Migratory Plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opposes Bush's Migratory Plan; supports the Hagel-Daschel Plan.
8. Death penalty	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In favor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Against, except for terrorists.
9. Environmental protection	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed oil drilling in Arctic reserves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposes a program for developing non-polluting energy sources.
10. Abortion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Against. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In favor.

Department. In addition, successive tax cuts, together with the recession, have contributed to lowering tax revenues 19 percent, and the fiscal deficit has reached around U.S.\$500 billion.¹¹

Despite tax cuts contributing to an 11 percent increase in families' available income, benefits to the general population have been few, while the rich have profited the most. The fiscal deficit pressures the dollar downward, and irrational indebtedness to finance the military campaign threatens to create a severe crisis that would worsen unemployment and inflation rates. All of this has led to the public giving signs of discontent. Recent polls show that 59 percent of Americans disapprove of Bush's management of the economy, and 57 percent think that Kerry could do better.¹² It is even estimated that approximately 11 percent of the voters who supported Bush in 2000 are disappointed and say they are going to vote for the Democratic candidate.¹³ It is important to mention that, historically, voters' perceptions of the economy have determined incumbent presidents' possibilities for reelection.¹⁴

These economic concerns have changed the pattern of the candidates' discourses, placing more emphasis on domestic issues like unemployment, taxes and health care. Issues like abortion and the environment have been practically excluded from the electoral discourse. Despite Bush's immigration proposal and Democratic Senators Hagel and Daschle's bill, migration will not be significant in this election.¹⁵

The race between Kerry and the president will be determined to a large extent by funding. Both candidates have opted for private funding of their campaigns. In any case, after their respective conventions, both candidates

will receive nearly U.S.\$75 million in public funding as stipulated by law. However, as of now, Kerry is at a disadvantage: Bush has raised much more money, almost U.S.\$175 million. Meanwhile, Kerry has about U.S.\$40 million of the U.S.\$100 that the Democratic Party plans to raise. However, until now the anti-Bush campaign run by the political movements called "527s" has given Kerry some relief in the political ad fight.¹⁶

THE MINORITY VOTE

The increase in minority populations in the U.S. (alarming for some Anglo-Americans) has meant that they have played an important role in recent elections. This year, minority voters are expected to play a determinant role in the presidential election.

Each minority has specific characteristics, needs and problems that make up its identity and that, one way or another, explain its electoral behavior. The parties and candidates know how important it will be to have their support. For now, the candidates seem to be focusing on winning the vote of the nine million Hispanics expected to participate in the presidential election,¹⁷ but they have also sought to attract the Afro-American, Asian, Arab and —though to a much lesser extent— Native American populations.

For example, in the Democratic primaries, the role of minorities has been important in practically all the southern states. The minority vote was important March 2 for Kerry's victory, above all in California, New York, Maryland and Georgia.¹⁸

Estimates say that most Afro-Americans (63 percent) will vote for the Dem-

ocratic Party, attracted by its economic and social proposals that promise lower unemployment and better working conditions.¹⁹ Latinos —except Cubans who are a majority Republican— are expected to vote for the Democratic candidate. In a recent *Election Focus* survey, only 36 percent of Latinos said they supported Bush and, despite his proposed migratory plan, 63 percent of those polled think that Bush does not care about immigrants and is only seeking the Latino vote.

PROSPECTS

This is probably the most important election in recent U.S. history. Domestically, the United States is very polar-

ized, with a debate about the future of the democratic republic and the repositioning of the U.S. neo-empire. The presidential election will decide who will hold the destiny of the world's most powerful nation in his hands. This is no small thing in an international situation in which, as never before, there will be a discussion, in the framework of the latest March 11 terrorist attacks in Spain, about multilateralism and the reform of international bodies like the United Nations on which the balance of the international system depends. Washington's responsibility in this process is significant. On the other hand, we should add that the political and economic processes of most of the world's nations are linked to U.S. eco-

nomical performance. This is why the main players in the international economy are very interested in the U.S. political process. The election results are particularly important for Mexico because they will define the conditions in which bilateral relations will play out in the medium term. Issues like migration, free trade, human rights and the environment will be affected some way, depending on who wins the race. It is still early to say which candidate is in Mexico's best interests. If Bush remains in office, there could be continuity in relations, which have not advanced substantively around the issues of greatest importance for our country; and there is no reason to think that that would change in coming years. Kerry, for his part, has given little indication of

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any real interest in Mexico and bilateral relations. In any case, we would have to ask ourselves if the Democratic candidate would not be forced to take on hard-line, protectionist positions on NAFTA. Regardless of the outcome, the Mexican and U.S. governments will have to do detailed, professional follow-up on the pending and future issues on the bilateral negotiations table. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Al Sharpton and Dennis Kucinich are still in the race, but have won only a few delegates.

² www.thegreenpapers.com

³ CNN, 11 March 2004.

⁴ It should be mentioned that the self-styled defender of consumer rights, Ralph Nader, announced that he is running again as an

independent candidate. According to a *Washington Post* survey (March 8, 2004), Nader will get three percent of the vote, which could make the difference between the two main candidates, who polls say today are running neck in neck. In fact, Nader's candidacy particularly affects Kerry.

⁵ Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, 18 and 19 February 2004, applied to 900 registered voters.

⁶ Including 23 super-delegates. This figure may increase in the primaries yet to come.

⁷ Reuters, 8 March 2004.

⁸ David Halbfinger, "With Super Tuesday Behind Him, Kerry Shifts to High General Election Gear," *The New York Times*, 4 March 2004.

⁹ www.usatoday.com, 30 March 2004.

¹⁰ The former U.S. chief weapons inspector, former treasury secretary and former White House official for terrorism, respectively.

¹¹ See the article by Ignacio Perrotini in this issue of *Voices of Mexico*. [Editor's Note.]

¹² *Washington Post/ABC News*, 8 March 2004.

¹³ Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Disenchanted Bush Voters Consider Crossing Over," *The New York Times*, 22 February 2004.

¹⁴ Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan and Clinton were reelected at times when economic indicators were favorable. In contrast, Ford, Carter and Bush, Sr., lost their bids for reelection during times of low credibility and economic crisis.

¹⁵ In contrast to President Bush's plan, the bill presented by Senators Daschle (D-South Dakota) and Hagel (R-Nebraska) opens up the possibility for undocumented residents in the country to legalize their situation permanently if they comply with certain requirements: at least five years residence in the country, having worked a minimum of four years, having no police record or trouble with

the IRS, showing a knowledge of English and of "basic civic norms" and paying a U.S.\$1,000 fee.

¹⁶ The "527s" are named after the article that regulates their political participation. The most important of these groups are MoveON (sponsored by George Soros) and Media Fund.

¹⁷ Their vote was decisive in the 2000 election, when six million Hispanics participated (35 percent voted for Bush and 62 percent for Al Gore).

¹⁸ For instance, in California, 74 percent of Latinos, who make up 16 percent of the population, voted for Kerry; in New York, 54 percent of Afro-Americans (20 percent of the population) and 71 percent of Latinos (11 percent of the population) supported the democratic candidate. www.cnnnews.com and www.washingtonpost.com

¹⁹ *Election Focus 2004*, 3 March 2004, www.usstatedepartment.gov

U.S. Elections Fact Sheet

HISTORY

- The first elections were held in 1619 for the Virginia House of Burgesses. Elections became common in the rest of the colonies and each one was a major event. Methods varied, from voice vote, hand raising and ballot boxes to the use of grains of wheat or beans to approve or reject a particular candidate.
- Voting requirements varied from colony to colony. At first, all residents were allowed to vote, including women. Later, requirements of property ownership, wealth, length of residence, type of employment and certain moral behavior were introduced. It was even a requirement that voters knew how to read and write.
- After the election of George Washington and the passage of the 1789 Constitution, the electoral system was consolidated. The Electoral College was established and, with it, the practice of the indirect election of the president through delegates.
- Women (in 1920), Afro-Americans (in 1870 in the North and in 1960 in the South) and other minorities gradually won the right to vote.
- The two-party system emerged in the mid-nineteenth century when the Democratic Party (previously the Anti-Federalist Party) and the Republican Party were consolidated as the two main organizations. Third parties have existed, but they have played a lesser role in Congress and none has ever won the presidency. Since World War II, the two main parties have shared an overwhelming majority of 94.8 percent of the popular vote in presidential elections.

ELECTORAL PROCESS

- Each party selects its nominee through caucuses and primaries carried out in all the states which assign delegates to the candidates according to the results of each race. The caucuses are meetings or informal assemblies of the party's local political activists in which participants discuss their preferences and vote directly. Primaries, open or closed, are elections using ballot boxes; if they are open, all registered voters, not only those registered for the party in question, can participate.
- Although every four years the figure varies slightly, the Democrats generally have 4,322 delegates and the Republicans 2,509. In addition to the 3,520 delegates the Democratic Party elects in the primaries, it has approximately 800 super-delegates (802 this year) picked from distinguished figures who also participate in the National Convention and freely decide which candidate they support. The Republican Party has a similar number of non-committed delegates (753 this year). The candidate who gets the majority of delegates at the party convention wins the nomination.
- Up until now, all incumbent presidents who have sought their party's nomination have gotten it. However, those who have met with the greatest resistance inside their parties, despite getting the nomination, have not been reelected (notable examples are Gerald Ford, James Carter and George H. W. Bush).
- The final election of the president is decided by the 538 electors who make up the Electoral College, the same number per state as are in the House of Representatives. The states with the most electoral votes are California (55), Texas (34), New York (31), Florida (27), Pennsylvania (21), Illinois (21), Ohio (20), Michigan (17), Georgia (15) and New Jersey (15). To win the election, a candidate must get at least 270 electoral votes. When this does not happen, the House of Representatives decides the election.

FUNDING

- Electoral legislation stipulates that candidates in the primaries have a right to U.S.\$45 million in public funds, which they must decline if they accept private donations. Today, most candidates prefer to raise private funding and have developed strategies to get around federal regulations limiting contributions.
- After the 1974 Watergate scandals revealed that illegal monies from corporations and wealthy individuals had gone into Richard Nixon's reelection coffers, restrictions were established setting a limit of U.S.\$1,000 in private contributions per candidate for primary or general races, with a U.S.\$25,000 maximum per year per donor for different candidates.
- The McCain-Feingold Act sets certain restrictions on the way campaign monies can be raised and spent, particularly limiting so-called "soft contributions", those given to political parties by individuals, corporations, unions and other bodies, instead of directly to the candidates.
- Despite legal restrictions, candidates and parties can spend millions of dollars in radio and television spots, direct contact with the voters and the so-called "issue spots" that promote political positions on specific topics without mentioning the name or showing an image of any candidate.