

The U.S. Elections And Boosted Republican Dominance

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Jason Reed/Reuters

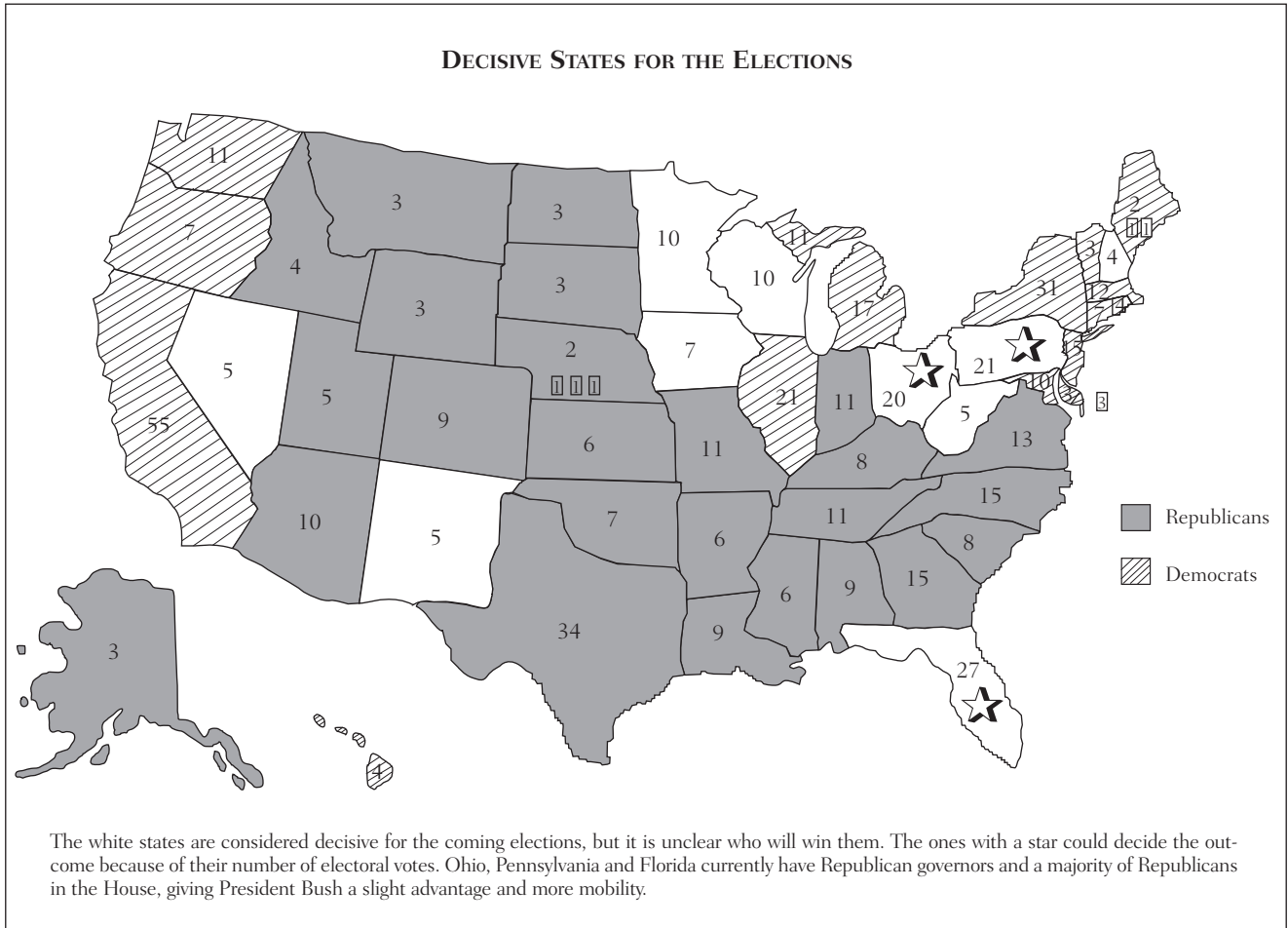
While the media has given broad coverage to the U.S. presidential race, the House of Representatives, one third of the Senate and some governors' seats are also up for election November 2. Trends over the last ten years have favored the Re-

publican Party, above all in the House, but the current campaign, with the withdrawal of Democratic politicians and the close race for three states that may well be won by the conservatives, may lead the Democratic Party to lose not only the House, but also the Senate by a larger margin than in the last election. If this happens, the Republicans will be cel-

ebrating their first decade of undisputed electoral dominance, which began in 1995 under the leadership of the now forgotten Newt Gingrich.

The shift in the U.S. government under the Republican leadership and majority has been seen by some as a "conservative revolution." For others, it is the continuity of a project as old

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as the nation itself. What they can all agree on is that the shift has been noticeable both domestically and in foreign policy. Undoubtedly, the issues of security and terrorism dominate the presidential contenders' discourses, and seemingly, the Republicans have known better how to sell the idea that they, and not the Democrats, are the ones who the voters should "trust." Bush campaign strategists try to project the image of a tough leader, capable of making swift decisions. How-

ever, the Republican candidate uses old tricks in his electoral discourse, like invoking society's old values and repeatedly reiterating that the United States is a nation chosen by God, something best preserved by the dominance of the Republicans and the interests they represent. However, because of their crisis, the Democrats do not seem to have the same ability to renew their cadre, at least in Congress, or to build an image of their candidates that would attract the average

citizen, much less the elites. The Republicans have been doing exactly the opposite: a glance at their candidates for the Senate and governors' slots clearly shows that in the last ten years of victories, they have learned the importance of their cadre being politically mobile and of the shot in the arm to their cause that a new generation of conservative politicians can be.

Everything indicates that once again the ability to mobilize that the Republican Party has demonstrated

since the 1994 elections will be fundamental for getting its voters out on November 2, traditionally wealthy, white men, WASPS and seniors. However, it will be interesting to see how many women and young people vote Republican. Undoubtedly, with the possibility of a tie looming, both John Kerry and George W. Bush will zealously cultivate the undecided voters who today represent the decisive segment for a win at the polls.

Traditionally high abstentionism will make a repeat appearance this November. However, in theory, a higher number of voters would benefit the Democratic candidate, since it has been proven that high abstentionism favors the Republicans because its hardcore vote is located in increasingly important states like Ohio and Michigan, among others.

The way the Republicans have selected their candidates seems to show that they are building a political class that combines experience with new-style politicians, a strategy designed to continue heading up the legislative branch in coming years. While the internal congressional rules ensure that the Democrats cannot be excluded from the game, increasingly dominated by the Republicans, they are at a disadvantage in training young cadre and are very behind in terms of the political imagination needed to face down the conservative project, both domestically and in foreign policy.

Only days before the elections, the two candidates will try to examine their political proposal and take advantage of their opponents' mistakes, although winning Congress could be more difficult for the Democratic Party, and the Republicans seem to once again have the advantage for winning both

houses. If Kerry wins, he will have to deal with a divided government, and, given the rules and customs of the legislative process, he will have a hard time governing without conceding something to the opposition party.

The political arteriosclerosis of the electoral system for the legislature means that the races will really only be close in 26 districts. In that context, Hispanic legislators, particularly those of Mexican or Mexican-American descent, take on more importance because they are young and have effective control of their districts. After 28 years, Hispanics may win a Senate seat: the last Latino senator was Joseph Montoya, a Democrat from New Mexico, who lasted 13 years in office. Now both parties have Latino candidates in the race: the Democrats are running Ken Salazar, of Mexican origin, in Colorado, and the Republicans, Mel Martínez, of Cuban origin, in Florida.

If the Republicans win the elections again, the administration will prob-

ably have more room for implementing its political agenda in all sectors, spearheading with its anti-terrorist policy, that may continue to be inoperative as it has been until now.

The existence of third parties is another factor that benefits the Republican strategy since Ralph Nader gleans his support from voters with liberal views on social issues. However, some voters think his party does not represent a substantial difference, which makes it far from a real option for change.

The concern for millions of voters is that the dire straits of the democratic system do not seem to matter to the two hegemonic parties, which seem to increasingly agree when it comes time to make important decisions.

Democratic leaders have managed to set up a campaign infrastructure nationwide that allows them to have a minimal but organized sector of voters, that is, a participatory minority that will legitimize a system based less and less on consensus. While that system will be questioned in the rest of the world because of high abstentionism, it seems to be only minimally affected by these criticisms, in contrast with factors such as the need for pressing changes in world politics and the debilitation created by facing increasingly noticeable differences in the United States' social and political development.

Seemingly, having a less and less competitive electoral system is not a serious problem for the U.S. political class. After the controversial 2000 elec-

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tions, U.S. citizens concerned about their system's lack of credibility and representativeness have witnessed how the federal government and some state governments have responded only with a few more or less superficial changes in regulating campaign financing, particularly "soft" funding; restricting the terms for which legislators can be reelected and reducing the enormous advantages big corporations enjoy for intervening in the elections —big scandals like the Enron debacle and

ELECTION RESULTS (1984-2000)					
ELECTION	PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEARS*				
	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Presidency	Ronald Reagan (R)	George Bush (R)	Bill Clinton (D)	Bill Clinton (D)	George W. Bush (R)
House of Representatives	Democratic Majority 269 166 (D) (R)	Democratic Majority 258 177 (D) (R)	Democratic Majority 267 167 (D) (R)	Republican Majority 204 230 (D) (R)	Republican Majority 211 223 (D) (R)
Senate	Republican Majority 54 46 (R) (D)	Democratic Majority 55 45 (D) (R)	Democratic Majority 56 44 (D) (R)	Republican Majority 52 48 (R) (D)	Republican Majority 54 46* (R) (D)

*This table does not include mid-term congressional elections.
Sources: <http://www.senate.gov/> and <http://clerk.house.gov/>

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their links to the political class do not seem important to voters. Making real reforms in these areas would undoubtedly damage the hegemony of the two main parties and, given the political priorities of the moment, these issues will probably be far from the priority in coming years.

Preserving equilibrium to avoid falling into authoritarianism seems to be a goal far from the Republicans' political practice; they tend to strengthen conservative, exclusionary policies that promote greater social inequality.

In a political system in which money continues to be a central factor, achieving that equilibrium is what makes Nancy Pelosi popular even among the

most conservative Democrats. Undoubtedly, this new leader will be enormously responsible for the political fate of a party which in recent years has dedicated itself to putting forward a project that brings together the United States' different anti-Republican groups.

The 2002 electoral results showed the inertia of the U.S. population in its move toward conservatism both on the foreign agenda and domestic issues. The coming elections will probably not reverse that trend.

Undoubtedly, any hopes the Democrats may have for a victory can only be centered on the Oval Office, since they are very far from being able to regain control over the two Houses of

Congress. Their old party leader Richard Gephardt retired after an unfortunate showing in his party's primaries. Counterposed to this is the promising leadership of Nancy Pelosi who, even if she achieved internal consensus in the Democratic caucus, would have to admit that she does not have the formula for getting the Democrats out of the profound political crisis they are in today: it is a party that not only has few good candidates, but also few alternative policies, so necessary for fulfilling the expectations of many Americans and of most of the peoples of the world, so unhappy with the Republicans' warlike-conservative control and tired of the Bush dynasty's lies. **NMM**