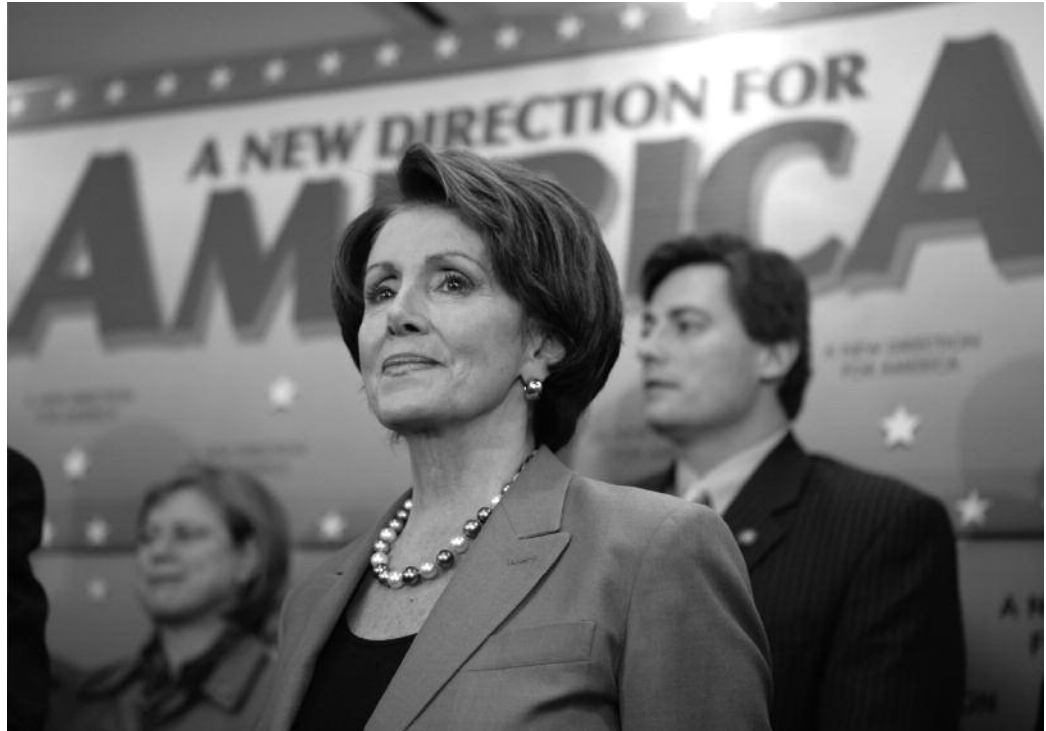


# Social Snapshots of the U.S. Midterm Elections

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Reuters/Kevin Lamarque

For the first time a woman, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, will preside over the House of Representatives.

The expectations that gave rise to the recent U.S. congressional election results are the framework for this article. Its object is to use statistics to illustrate the social conditions surrounding the process, which, because they were mainly domestic, received little attention from Mexican analysts studying the central aspects of U.S. foreign policy: Iraq, security and the fight against terrorism, among the most important.

Five years after the tragic events of 9/11, followed by the failed invasion of Iraq and amidst corruption scandals, the U.S. public has gradually reduced its support for President George W.

Bush and his party. Voters favored the Democrats, basing themselves on two central considerations: the administration's inability to control and manage the complex situation in Iraq and evidence of bad economic performance.

With regard to the former, I will limit myself to pointing out that casualties since the beginning of the U.S. army's campaign have already exceeded 3,000 dead and almost 22,000 injured,<sup>1</sup> and estimated expenditures have reached U.S.\$350 billion.<sup>2</sup>

This not only discredited Bush, but prompted the questioning of one of the doctrines of U.S. foreign policy that legitimized interventionism as a "humanitarian responsibility." In other words, the means for achieving a higher

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goal, went, in this case, from the promotion of democracy and the liberation of a people to the imposition of U.S. domination.

#### ON TRUST

Even though examples abound in U.S. history demonstrating an anti-state tradition favoring a limited bureaucracy and small government, the political actors headed up by the president need to have the public's trust to legitimize their actions. In that sense, we find that by mid-2003, 70 percent of the U.S. public supported President Bush, who benefited from a media strategy that appealed to traditional values like patriotism to be used as a practical instrument to channel the problem of growing uncertainty due to the terrorist threat, personified in Bin Laden and Iraq's supposed destructive capabilities.

Since the end of 2004, once safely re-elected by the small margin of 62 million to 59 million of the popular vote, Bush's critical performance as a military strategist and political leader deepened until it ended up turning the November 2006 midterm elections into a referendum on himself. The results were that 56 percent of Americans did not approve of him, and 61 percent

considered the country needed to change course.<sup>3</sup>

This same downward trend has affected trust in the administration as a whole. In July 2004, 40 percent of those interviewed by CBS News and *The New York Times* said that they always or almost always trusted it, while, by September 2006, that figure had dropped to 27 percent.

Another symptom of President Bush's failing popularity is also the 10-point drop in the public's trust in the executive branch, contrasted with its trust in the judiciary between 2004 and 2006: the former dropped from 58 percent to 48 percent, while the latter increased from 65 percent to 69 percent.<sup>4</sup>

#### ON SOCIAL WELFARE

According to the numbers, it would not be wildly speculative to say that the incisive support for reinforcing national security *per se* worked against strategies to strengthen social welfare policies, which had a big electoral price tag for the Republican Party. According to a Pew Center survey before the elections, voters' preferences for the Democrats cited their greater ability to deal with health issues (48 percent) and the economy (46 percent), in addition to security matters, as the reasons. A September Gallup poll showed that 66 percent of Americans thought the economy was weak, and that their two main concerns were hikes in gas prices and energy consumption (26 percent) and the gap between rich and poor (24 percent).<sup>5</sup>

In this last scenario, I think it is important to underline the fact that the Census Bureau drew the poverty line for a family of four at an annual income of U.S.\$19,157 in 2004. This means that

37 million U.S. citizens are considered needy. Of these, almost 13 million are under 18, and some studies conclude that they have fewer opportunities for upward social mobility than poor children in different developed European countries. With regard to education, estimates say that only 3 percent of students at the best U.S. universities come from families with limited incomes.

Considering the importance of immigration in U.S.-Mexico relations, we can observe a peculiar political cast to the understanding of the poverty-immigration link since analysts insist on saying that most immigrant minors face poverty in the United States given that the Census Bureau itself recognizes that 74 percent of children living in poverty are not immigrants (2004). Disregarding this evidence, conservative groups like The Heritage Foundation oppose bills favoring amnesty for undocumented immigrants, arguing that they promote the entry of non-skilled labor which in turn will force an increase in welfare programs, spurring greater poverty and overloading U.S. taxpayers.

On the other hand, for the Democrats to consolidate their position, education is key. Debate on the issue has bogged down because the Republicans have opposed reforming the local funding system that deepens the disparity in the quality of education between rich and poor counties, while the Democrats have not been capable either of limiting teachers' unions because they are afraid of losing their votes.

In a universe that in 2004 contained a little over 290 million people, total spending on welfare programs reached U.S.\$583 billion. If we examine its distribution by the educational level of the heads of households benefited, we find

the higher the level of schooling, the lower is the government subsidy. People with university degrees receive U.S.\$638 for each family member while those without a high school diploma receive U.S.\$4,461 per member.<sup>6</sup>

The middle class has felt the negative impact of the economic slow-down and some statistics show that university graduates' annual income has dropped for the first time in decades almost to the levels of that of high school graduates.

While the income of average workers in the United States has increased only 10 percent in real terms compared to what they earned 25 years ago at the same time that their hourly productivity has increased 30 percent, the tendency to concentrate income at the higher levels has continued to rise during the same period.<sup>7</sup>

The top one percent of Americans doubled their participation in total income from 8 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2004. One-tenth of this group has tripled their participation from 2 percent to 7 percent; and the 14,000 taxpayers at the very top of the pyramid have quadrupled their share from 0.65 percent to 2.8 percent in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

It is estimated that the average U.S. CEO earns 300 percent of what he or she would have earned in 1970 in a post with the same responsibilities.

The table on this page shows the disparities in average annual income by kind of household, gender and race.

ON WOMEN AND POLITICS

The table shows at a glance the gap between households headed by women and two-parent families. This makes it useful to put into context some char-

acteristics and results of the recent elections.

The numbers point to a constant increase in women's participation in U.S. elections since 1992, to the degree that they made up 51 percent of the voters in the last election.

Of a total of almost 79 million voters, women are recognized as a central part of the Democratic Party's constituency, together with Hispanics and Afro-Americans: 55 percent of women and 50 percent of men voted for it.

Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics stated that this election has been a significant advance for women running for office: as of January 2007, 71 seats out of 435 in the House of Representatives will be occupied by women, compared to only 19 in 1975.

A total of 138 women ran for the House, a number close to 2004's record of 141 women who won their parties' primaries and ran for the lower house.

Women have been slower to enter the Senate. Of the 100 seats, in 1991, only two were occupied by women; in 2001, 13; and by 2006, the number had increased to a record 16.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to recognize that in both houses, most women with seats are Democrats. In the House, 50 Demo-

**U.S. political culture continues to be very determined by voters' social class, race and gender, while its practices and values are markedly masculine.**

crats and 21 Republicans were women; in the Senate, 11 women are from the Democratic Party and 5 from the Republican.

Among the different interpretations of women's recent advancement is politics' bad reputation because of corruption—exemplified by the Abramoff case—where men have been the central figures. Nevertheless, perceptions about politicians' behavior can be very diverse. This is the case of recently re-elected Senator Hilary Clinton. Her performance as First Lady, together with her vocation for public service, has made her very popular despite the fact that her recent campaign cost more than U.S.\$33 million.

Lastly, it is important to point out that for the first time in the history of the United States a woman, Nancy

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INCOME  
FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN UNDER 18 (2003)  
(U.S. DOLLARS)

	WHITE	AFRO-AMERICAN	HISPANIC
Two-parent families	73,622	55,533	39,850
Families with female heads of household	31,076	20,670	22,556

**Source:** Douglas J. Besharov, "Measuring Poverty after Katrina," *American Enterprise Institute*, August 28, 2006.

Pelosi, will be Speaker of the House. In addition, nine women governors represent 18 percent of the total; six are Democrats and 3 are Republicans.

Thus, the high number of women's votes means, among other things, a willingness to transcend strictly competitive values and a renunciation of private life in order to favor cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The functioning of democracy requires reference points that allow citizens to trust in its mechanisms and institutions. Like a body that results from the interaction of groups, communities and individuals, it also ends up determining the kinds of relationships established among them to resolve their differences. For that reason, democracy

fulfills its function beyond electoral processes when, through transparent management, it allows for the articulation of different interests seeking the health of the nation.

This article attempts to show that social welfare and inclusion are transcendental issues for promoting a new era in U.S. democracy, still characterized by asymmetry, shown, among other things, by the fact that 64 percent of registered voters are members of families whose annual income is over U.S.\$30,000.

I think that the U.S. political culture continues to be very determined by voters' social class, race and gender, while its practices and values are markedly masculine. This situates the country far from what is called parity democracy, in which women's participation in political posts would not be

lower than 40 percent or higher than 60 percent. **MM**

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> www.defenselink.mil, consulted December 12, 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> www.nationalpriorities.org, consulted December 12, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey, October 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Gallup Organization, *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> NBCNews/Wall Street Journal survey, September 8-10, 2006, quoted in *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, March 2005 (data for 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> "The rich, the poor and the growing gap between them," *The Economist*, June 17, 2006, pp. 24-26.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/>, consulted December 17 and 18, 2006. The Center for American Women and Politics, under the aegis of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, has a long-running, prestigious reputation for the production of rigorous statistics, history and analysis of women and politics in the United States.



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