



## Paradoxes of the 1998 U.S. Elections

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**T**he mid-term elections recently held in the United States provided some surprising results. For the first time since 1822, a Democratic president's party won seats in the House of Representatives during a second presidential term instead of losing them.

The Republicans retained their majority in both houses of Congress on November 3, though by a much smaller margin than they had anticipated. The composition of the Senate remained unchanged, with 55 Republicans and 45 Democrats. In the House of Representatives the Republicans still hold a majority—223 against 211—after losing five seats. The Republicans govern 31 states, the Democrats 17, and independents, two.

However, these statistics are not enough to analyze the real consequences of the

elections, so we will raise a series of considerations concerning the different levels of government.

### PRESIDENT CLINTON WINS WITHOUT RUNNING

While mid-term elections are dominated by local issues, on this occasion the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton were the backdrop to the electoral process. As in the 1996 election, the Republicans tried to make the elections into a referendum on the president. However, the polls indicate that a majority of the public perceives the impeachment process as a retaliation, although this does not mean it condones Clinton's personal shortcomings. Voters decided not to base their decision on what has been said about the president's private life since, again, opinion polls show that the public is optimistic about the situation of the country. The

U.S. economy is still growing steadily, unemployment has declined, and there are no international conflicts threatening the security of the United States.

On the other hand, the Republicans' attitude of going after the president influenced the most loyal sectors of the Democratic Party—Afro-Americans, women, Latinos, and unionized workers—to vote in large numbers for their party, which provided the Democrats with the margin needed to win in certain very close races.

As is traditional in mid-term elections, most U.S. voters stayed home on election day, and only 37 percent of those eligible went to the polls.

Although the Democrats did not recover a majority, the results were sufficiently favorable to allow President Clinton to conclude his term in conditions of greater strength vis-à-vis his party, his country and the world. With the year 2000 presidential elections approaching, the outcome of this year's races will result in

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greater internal cohesion of the Democratic Party and allow it to propose a government program more consistent with the expectations of voters, who believe the Democrats offer better campaign pledges.

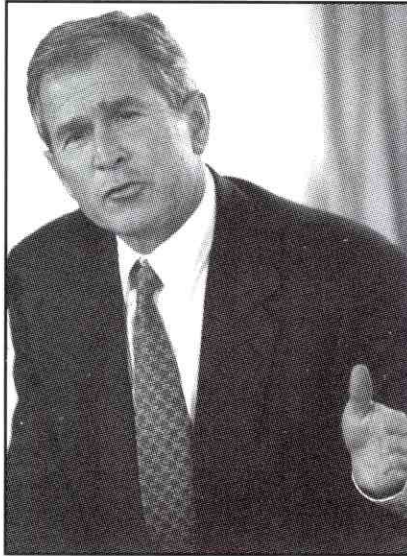
The presidential candidacy for the year 2000 of Vice President Al Gore also was strengthened. Gore's participation in the last weeks of the electoral process was outstanding, campaigning in favor of his fellow party candidates.

#### TOWARD GREATER BIPARTISAN CONSENSUS

As previously mentioned, the equilibrium between the parties was maintained in the Senate, with 55 Republicans and 45 Democrats. The former were unable to obtain the majority of 60 senators they need to stop filibustering,<sup>1</sup> and therefore, their possibilities of subjecting the president to impeachment proceedings have diminished.

The Republicans suffered some important defeats. For example, Alphonse D'Amato lost the New York Senate seat to Democratic candidate Charles Schumer.

In the House of Representatives, the political effects of the elections' outcome were immediate. Newt Gingrich, Republic spokesman and legislator, who organized the party's electoral victory in the 1994 elections based on the "Contract with America," was now the scapegoat for the results at the ballot box. A few days after the election, and given the threat of a revolt within Republican ranks, Gingrich declared that not only would he not again seek the post of speaker of the House, but would even resign his seat. The position of speaker of the House has great political



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importance in Washington and is perhaps the best known post in the legislature.

The new House speaker will be Louisiana congressman Robert Livingston. Although the southern legislator is also a conservative, it is felt that his style will be much more discreet than that of Gingrich, who tended to exercise power autocratically. In his first interviews as a candidate for House speaker, Livingston called for granting much more power to the presidents of legislative commissions.

From the point of view of legislative policy, it can be expected that the Republicans will not be able to carry their impeachment proceedings against President Clinton to their ultimate consequen-

ces, and perhaps they will be inclined to a more bipartisan policy. At the same time, it is likely that the more conservative legislators who took office in 1994 and were re-elected in this year's races will play a more active role and pressure the new Republican leaders to adopt a more conservative political line.

For the Democrats, as I already mentioned, the electoral results are a breather and afford the possibility of promoting a more coherent legislative agenda and thus prepare for the year 2000 elections with greater internal cohesion.

#### STATE ELECTIONS

While overseas great attention is not usually placed on state election results, the policies of the New Federalism, which granted the states many of the attributes previously held by the federal government, as well as the economic prosperity achieved by some states, have made governors' activities increasingly important for understanding new tendencies in public policies in the United States.

It is particularly important for Mexico to remain abreast of political developments in the states along its borders. With this in mind, several important developments should be pointed out.

On a national level, the Republicans managed to maintain most gubernatorial spots, even though they suffered a major defeat in California, where Democratic candidate Gray Davis won the race against Pete Wilson's heir, Dan Lungren, who had been state attorney general. In California, the political strength of new social groups made its appearance, particularly among voters of Mexican origin who felt their

interests deeply affected by Proposition 187. An expression of this participation and renewed political activism by voters of Mexican background is the election of a Latino politician, in this case Cruz Bustamante of Fresno, as lieutenant governor.

In New Mexico another Latino, Martin Chávez, also ran for governor. Despite having the support of the entire Democratic Party apparatus, from Hillary Clinton to Vice President Al Gore, he was unable to defeat Republican Governor Gary Johnson.

Nonetheless, not all Latinos vote for the Democrats, and the Republicans have clearly understood that they cannot ignore the strength of the Hispanic electorate, much less offend or mobilize it with an anti-immigrant policy. An interesting example of this new Republican perception was displayed in Texas, where George Bush Jr. won the elections with 69 percent of the vote in a race in which special emphasis was placed on voters of Mexican origin. The results of the race have made Bush a strong contender for the Republican nomination for the year 2000 presidential elections.

By the same token, in the state of Florida, Jeb Bush, brother of the Texas governor, also scored an important victory, complemented with the presence of Republican majorities in both houses of the state congress. In this case, the Latino electorate, particularly Cuban-Americans, was especially targeted.

Another important point related to the year 2000 electoral process is that the Republican Party consolidated its political presence in the south, a Democratic stronghold for more than 100 years, and its domination in Western states—Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico,

Utah and Wyoming. Although these states together have the same or less population than Florida or California, they comprise a bastion of safe Electoral College votes for the Republicans.

Finally, in a curious note, the new governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, a member of Ross Perot's Reform Party who until recently earned his living as a wrestler, defeated both Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey III—son of former Vice President Humphrey—as well as Republican contender Norm Coleman, both well known traditional style politicians. This race and the re-election of independent governor Angus King of Maine reflect a certain tendency toward a quest for other political options, even if not posed as an alternative to the traditional two-party system.

Another important question is the process of redistricting. The U.S. Constitution stipulates that electoral districts, both federal and state, must be determined based on a census taken every 10 years. This process of redrawing district lines takes place in the state legislatures, and therefore the balance of forces in each state is very important. While districts can have more or less the same number of inhabitants, in U.S. political life traditionally the drawing of district lines is manipulated, a procedure that even has a name: gerrymandering.

Since the next census will coincide with local elections, it will acquire much greater importance than is normally the case. In the end, the Democrats obtained control of both houses in 21 state congresses, the Republicans have a majority in 17, and in 11 states the two parties share power. The Nebraska state legislature has only one chamber, and its members are not elected on party tickets.

With the strengthening of state powers, redistricting will influence how billions of dollars are spent as well as the future of education and welfare policies.

Finally, another element in the recent electoral process were referenda voted by the electorate against the opinion of state legislatures and federal policies. The most important case involved the approval of ballot initiatives to allow the medical use of marijuana in five states: Alaska, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon and Washington.

The 1998 elections confirmed the idea once expressed by House speaker Thomas P. O'Neill during the Ronald Reagan presidency, in the sense that "all politics is local." In most of the races, citizens voted based on specific concerns, not adherence to a specific party. At the same time, the results show the close relationship between local, state and national issues, since the biggest winner, President Clinton, was not even in the running. On the other hand, the elections for governors' seats and the results of state legislative races will be key in understanding U.S. politics with a view to the presidential elections in the year 2000, and on a more long-term basis, the importance of electoral redistricting and its impact on Democratic or Republican predominance. ■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The filibuster, a parliamentary tactic aimed at delaying decisions, is based on the right of senators to speak without restriction. This allows a single senator, at the end of the discussion period, to hold up legislation by speaking for as long as he or she desires. The number of senators is important, due to the rule that stipulates that if three-fifths of the Senate, that is, 60 senators, decide to do so, they can stop a speaker. For a detailed explanation of the question see Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1988), pp. 243-246.