

The 2000 U.S. Elections

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Several things are at stake in the U.S. 2000 elections: which party will occupy the White House after eight years of Clinton's Democratic administration; what chances the Democrats have of recovering the majority in the House of Representatives; and how they will do in a close race for the Senate, though it does not look like the Republicans will lose their current majority.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

This year's presidential election is important both because the president cannot be reelected and, above all, because the new administration will draw up the policies for dealing with the challenges of the new century, taking into account the rapid changes over the last few decades, particularly the end of the Cold War. At the same time, given that the United States is at peace and still experiencing unprecedented economic prosperity, there are no profoundly controversial issues. This means that the campaign's outcome is expected to hinge on the candidates' images and the amount of

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money invested more than on any substantive debate.

Since the Republicans do not occupy the White House, they began generating a long list of presidential hopefuls in 1999, among them: Elizabeth Dole, former secretary of transportation under President Reagan; Dan Quayle, former vice president; John R. Kasich, congressman from Ohio; Lamar Alexander, former governor of Tennessee; Steve Forbes, the owner of *Forbes* business magazine; Orrin Hatch, senator for Utah; Patrick Buchanan, ultraconservative commentator and politician; Gary Bauer and Allan Keyes, former Reagan administration officials; John McCain, senator for Arizona; and lastly, George W. Bush, current governor of Texas.

However, the enormous cost of the campaigns and the lack of political support led Dole, Quayle, Kasich and Alexander to abandon their attempts even before the primaries began. In February, Gary Bauer and Steve Forbes announced they were also withdrawing from the race. Patrick Buchanan, for his part, resigned from the Republican Party to join the Reform Party, founded by millionaire Ross Perot, which millionaire Donald Trump also announced he would join to seek its presidential nomination.

From the very beginning Texas Governor George W. Bush, was the front runner for the Republican nomination. He based his political hopes on having raised almost U.S.\$60 million, the support of his party leadership and on poll results that pointed to him as a possible victor over Vice President Gore. His personal political history, however, is extraordinarily mediocre (an average student at elite schools, a bad oil businessman, the owner of a baseball team and finally, the incumbent governor of Texas), unlike his family ties, which have allowed him to rise to the position he currently holds.

From the ideological point of view, Bush is considered relative moderate, compared to the other more conservative currents dominating his party; he is an inter-

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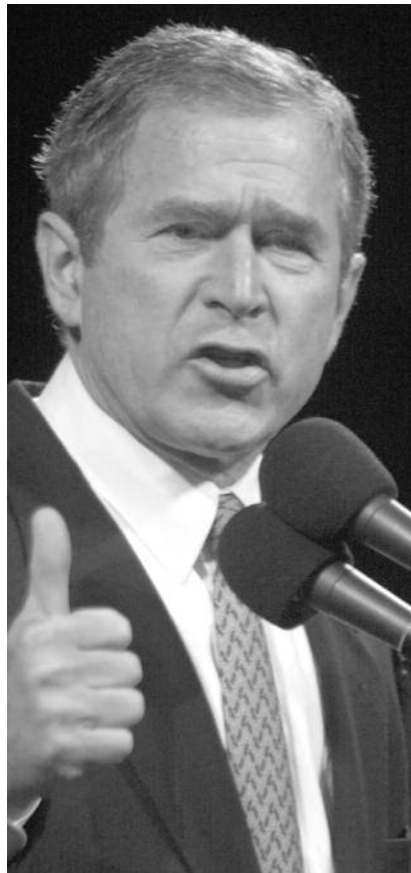
nationalist like his father, although without the latter's knowledge and experience, and open to ethnic minorities.

While Bush's victory was a foregone conclusion, Arizona Senator John McCain, a Vietnam war veteran who spent five years as a POW there, managed to turn himself into a real contender for the nomination after winning the New Hampshire primary. McCain was a conservative candidate, but his being a war hero and a fighter who has come up through the ranks despite the party elite allowed him to attract not only Republican voters, but also independents and Democrats unsatisfied with the current state of things, particularly with regard to the undue influence of money in U.S. politics. The other hopefuls, particularly the ultraconservatives, did not really have a chance at the nomination, but they could have an impact on the debate so that certain demands are included in the platform and to force the ones really in the running to politically commit to the more radical groups of the ideological right.

The Democratic Party nominated Vice President Albert Gore who has long political experience thanks to his eight years in the administration's second post and his previous tenure as senator, plus the visibility associated with his current position. Nevertheless, former New Jersey senator, plus basketball star Bill Bradley managed to organize a campaign to vie for the Democratic nomination calling for politics based on the fundamental issues—health, race relations, campaign spending reform—and not on the media. Supertuesday marked the end of both McCain's and Bradley's aspirations.

Despite his distinct style and the hindrance that being close to President

Clinton—highly rated as a president but not as a person—is for Al Gore, the fact of the matter is that there are practically no profound political differences between him and Bradley. Both are new Democrats, a sector of the party that defends



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strong liberalism on some social and cultural questions but has taken some Republican issues on board like fiscal

responsibility, the reform of the welfare state and the defense of family values.

ELECTIONS FOR THE HOUSE

Although the 2000 presidential elections command the spotlight, the congressional elections, particularly for the House, are crucial because they offer the Democratic Party the chance to regain the majority it lost to the Republicans in 1994. It should be remembered here that whoever has the majority has political control of the House, heads the congressional committees and subcommittees and, therefore, decides a fundamental part of the U.S. political agenda.

Although the representatives are tested at the polls every two years, one of the characteristics of congressional elections is the high rate of reelection of incumbent members. For that reason, the future of the majority is actually played out in the so-called "open" seats, the ones in which the incumbent representative decides not to seek reelection. This year, the Republicans, with a slim five-seat majority, have 19 "open" seats and the Democrats only five.

The fact that the number of really hotly contested seats is small allows the parties to concentrate their political and material resources on those races. From 1994 to date, the Republican majority has gradually been eroded because the public perceives them as ideologically radical and even irresponsible after, for example, they allowed the U.S. government to come to a standstill when the budget had not been approved in time, and particularly because of the impression that they impeached President Clinton out of revenge.

THE SENATE RACES

The Republican Senate majority —55 to 45— is larger than in the House of Representatives, making it unlikely that they lose it. However, the possibility cannot be discarded out of hand since of the third of the Senate's 100 seats up for election this year, the Republicans hold 19 and the Democrats 14. Although both parties consider their seats safe, either could be in store for a surprise.

Of all the Senate races, the most publicized is the one for the seat vacated by Patrick Moynihan, legendary Democratic senator and prominent intellectual, and disputed by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republican New York City Mayor Rudolf Giuliani.

THE GOVERNORS' SEATS

The Republicans hold 30, the majority, of the country's governors' seats today, while the Democrats occupy 18. One state elected an independent and the Reform Party put ex-wrestler Jesse Ventura into the Minnesota state house, although he has now resigned from the party. This year only 11 governorships are up for election, so an important change in the Republican majority is not probable.

THE HISPANIC VOTE

One of the novelties of the 2000 electoral process is the importance of the Hispanic electorate. Since the 1996 elections in which they made up 5 percent of the total vote, the specific weight of Hispanic voters has been a determining fac-

tor in places like California, Texas and Florida, and important in other states like Arizona, New Mexico and even New Jersey and Illinois.

The new Hispanic activism arises from different causes. On the one hand, some



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estimates put the demographic weight of the population of Latin American origin at 30 million people. It also results from

the community's anger over California's Proposition 187, the changes in federal immigration and social security legislation, affecting legal Hispanic migrants, and the community's own process of political coming of age, which has created an awareness of the need to vote and support Hispanic candidacies for different elected positions.

This increased influence has not gone unnoticed by the politicians in either party, although until now Hispanics have in the main voted for the Democrats. In 1996, the Hispanic vote for Clinton was higher than 70 percent. The Republican Party, for its part, has mounted a national ad campaign in Spanish emphasizing issues such as education, tax cuts, facilities for setting up small businesses and family values, messages that potentially may resonate in this sector of the electorate.

George W. Bush, who was reelected in Texas with the support of the population of Mexican origin, places great importance on the Hispanic electorate. He has a bilingual Web site and speaks in Spanish to that sector of voters reminding them of his Texan origin and presenting himself as a new leader.

The Democratic Party is not counting blindly on its predominance among Hispanics. Vice President Gore also has a Web site in Spanish and the Democratic National Committee is basing its campaign on the party's history favoring Hispanics.

In any case, clearly U.S. political parties are increasingly giving more space to the specific demands of Hispanic voters and will try to back Latino candidates. This is an important new development in U.S. politics and should be followed with great attention since it could in the

long run have an impact on U.S. policy toward Mexico.

MEXICAN ISSUES

It is to be expected that in a year in which both Mexico and the United States hold elections, Mexico-related issues will be part of U.S. campaign debates. Something interesting happened in 1996. Mexico-related questions had more impact during the primary races than during the post-nomination campaigns themselves mainly because of the presence of conservative populist commentator Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot, obsessed with the issues of migration, drug trafficking and NAFTA. However, during the race between President Clinton and Senator Dole, these questions were put on the back burner both because other, more important domestic issues came to the fore and because both the U.S. and the Mexican governments made an effort for their bilateral relations to not be held hostage in electoral debates.

Things could be different this year, however, both because the electoral processes coincide and because the Reform Party may run Patrick Buchanan or another conservative populist for the presidency. This would imply spending money to maintain media presence and Mexico-related issues perhaps becoming important in a negative way.

It should not be forgotten that Buchanan's positions include the idea of cutting legal immigration by half; carrying out a national assimilation campaign among immigrants, which would include making learning English obligatory; denying social services to undocumented

—obviously Mexican— immigrants; and building barriers all along the border. With regard to trade, Buchanan has stated he favors tariffs and opposes all international institutions that promote free trade, starting with NAFTA.



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While the proposals of all those who have entered the U.S. electoral races are still a bit vague, they have already made some interesting statements on some

issues potentially related to Mexico. For example, Governor Bush has declared his support for upping the number of visas issued to highly skilled workers, as well as the creation of a temporary guest workers' program to cover the demand in agriculture and services.

Bradley, for example, classified Mexico, together with Japan, China, Russia and Germany, as priority countries for U.S. foreign policy. With regard to migration, he proposed legislation that would toughen up current policies. Vice President Gore considers migration something that enriches the country and favors protection of the rights of legal immigrants. In addition to certain domestic factors, the way in which Mexico-related issues will be dealt with in the autumn campaigns will also depend on the political events in our own country, considering that when the U.S. campaigns begin, the name of the next president of Mexico will already be decided. If he is from the opposition, it is very probable that policy toward Mexico will be part of the electoral debate.

In conclusion, we can say that while the U.S. electoral campaign will probably be relatively sedate given the U.S.'s favorable economic and international conditions, the enthusiasm that McCain and Bradley sparked and the possibility that Ross Perot's party could be a player have been a reflection of the disquiet among significant sectors of the U.S. electorate. On the other hand, a change in the party in the White House or in the House majority and greater public scrutiny of Mexico-related issues could have an important impact on Mexico-U.S. bilateral relations that should be observed closely. **MM**