

The U.S. Mid-Term Elections

A New Balance of Forces

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Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

President Bush in Pennsylvania a few days before the elections.

The 2002 elections in the United States—which renewed the entire House of Representatives, a third of the Senate, 36 governorships and some local legislatures—were surprising and unprecedented. The big winner was not even up for election: President George Bush. For the first time in almost a century, instead of the administration's party losing seats in Congress in a mid-term election, it won ground. At the end of the day, the Republicans won a majority in the Sen-

ate, with 51 seats, compared to the Democrats' 48 and one independent, and strengthened their majority in the House, bringing their caucus up to 229 versus 204 Democrats and two independents. The balance was more even for the governorships: 26 Republicans versus 24 Democrats (who won important victories in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, although they lost in states like Massachusetts, Maryland, Vermont, Rhode Island, Georgia, Florida and Texas). The Republicans, on the other hand, advanced in the state legislatures, winning a majority for the first time since 1952.

The atmosphere before election day was that of a country increasingly polarized both politically and economically. The political polarization had been clearly seen in the 2000 elections, where no candidate won a majority but the president-elect's legitimacy was severely questioned, though today he is the big winner.

Economist Paul Krugman has presented figures putting the average annual wage at U.S.\$35,864, while Chief Executive Officers of the country's most important corporations were making U.S.\$37.5 million, more than a thousand times the income of an average employee. This means that in recent

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years social inequality has been growing in the United States.¹ In addition serious corporate scandals, some linked to members of President Bush's cabinet, have affected the savings of thousands of Americans this year at a time when the economy has been very weak. In these conditions, both political and economic factors and historic trends would have presaged a certain gain by the Democrats.

So, we have to ask ourselves why the majority voted for the Republicans. The causes of this exceptional balloting are complex. At a national level, the September 11 attacks changed everything because the public's number one concern today is security. President Bush managed to give a national slant to an election that is usually focused on state or local issues and showed himself to be a formidable promoter crisscrossing the country seeking votes for his party's candidates, channeling the public's fears in their favor. The Republicans also managed to spend much more money than their opponents.

On the other side of the divide, the Democrats took a lukewarm stance that did not mobilize the electorate; if they had, in such a close race, they would have had the margin they needed for victory. In the past, the centrist strategy and taking over Republican issues like family values or the reform of the welfare state allowed the Democrats to stay in the White House for eight years, although they were also obviously aided by the long economic expansion of the 1990s. In contrast, in 2002, in addition to the element of fear, the electorate did not see the Democrats as a real alternative. Curiously, some candidates who did show themselves to be firmly in opposition won, like Democrat Christopher Van Hollen of Maryland.

REORGANIZATION OF CONGRESS

The most immediate result of the elections is the reorganization of the structure of domination inside the U.S. Congress, which automatically passes into the hands of the new majority, allowing it to preside over committees and sub-committees, which is where a substantial part of the legislative process takes place, and to control the agenda for both houses.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Although the Republicans already had a majority in the House, there has now been a change in leadership. The new speaker of the House, the most important post, will be Tom DeLay (R-Texas),

an ultra-conservative politician from Houston's twenty-second district. DeLay, born in Laredo, is close to oil interests and favors deregulation. Liberal circles are now very concerned about such a conservative member being named speaker.

The Democrats, for their part, have elected Nancy Pelosi as minority leader. A representative from San Francisco's eighth district, one of the most liberal in the country, Pelosi is the other side of the coin from DeLay with a consistent liberal voting record. In the course of her career, she has shown interest in relations with China, envi-

ronmental issues and the fight against AIDS.

Pelosi's election as minority whip came when Richard Gephardt retired after the defeat. It is the first time a woman has held such a high post in Congress. Politically, her election has been interpreted as the Democrats' need to position themselves as a real opposition party given the conservative domination of the entire federal government. Despite her clear liberalism, she is a greatly experienced politician; it even runs in the family: her father was mayor of Baltimore for 12 years. The new whip's challenge is to unify her party in Congress to present a united opposition front to some of the Bush administration's policies in a particularly difficult context, given that despite the fact that the Republican

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lead in the voting was not very large, what counts in the U.S. electoral system is who gets the win, even if only by a few votes.

In this framework, it is expected that voting in the House of Representatives will tend to be along strictly partisan lines.

THE SENATE

The changes in the Senate will be fundamental. The defection of former Republican Senator James M. Jeffords (Vermont), who became an independen-

dent but has voted with the Democrats, made it possible to delay a Republican majority in the Senate, which was ruled by a Democratic majority for the first two years of the Bush administration. Now, by contrast, the Republicans hold the majority.

The majority leader will be Mississippi Senator Trent Lott, who had been minority leader. Democratic Senator Tom Daschle decided, for his part, to continue heading up his party's caucus.

IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY

President Bush's statements after his party's electoral win indicate that he will focus on a relatively brief agenda: the creation of the Department of Homeland Security; the appointment

of conservative judges; a foreign policy centered on the conflict with Iraq; an economic policy that ensures continued tax reductions for corporations; and an environmental policy that would allow for opening up oil drilling in areas protected up until now.

cies and offices that now belong to different departments under a single roof.² The president has requested the right to hire and fire staff for the new department without regard to civil service laws on the books. In addition, the new security measures include the possibility that federal information will not only be shared with state and local authorities, but that the boundaries between public and private information will become more and more blurred, seriously endangering political liberties in the United States and creating a gigantic, powerful bureaucracy.

In addition to this domestic security policy, the Bush administration has another priority: strengthening the conservatism of the Supreme Court and the judicial system in general. After the election it is more probable that

because legislators like Richard Lugar, who heads up the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has his own opinion and his own agenda, or because politicians like Tom DeLay will try to capitalize on the victory to position themselves to the right of President Bush and push policies that are not necessarily administration priorities.

At the same time, among the Democrats there are those who think that the party has to be much more of an opposition that clearly distinguishes itself from the Republicans, above all on domestic policy, and others who think that this would be a very dangerous stance to take given a frightened electorate and a consistently conservative administration that could radically transform the political panorama of the United States in coming years.

Perhaps I should end with a note of caution: everything seems to indicate that this change has already occurred and that if President Bush manages to overcome the obstacles, he will be reelected in 2004 and consolidate a solid Republican congressional majority. However, the economy could still give everyone an unpleasant surprise and foreign policy could become a slippery playing field. In any case, the coin has been tossed, but it is still in the air, and, for the moment, the signs are not very good. **MM**

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In the short term, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security is the administration's priority, even before the new session of Congress opens with the Republican majority in January 2003. The creation of this department will be the largest reorganization of the U.S. government since World War II. It will bring 22 agen-

nominees be approved by the Senate, thereby ensuring that the conservative influence reshape legal decisions for decades.

The Bush administration has used consensus in the Congress on his Iraq policy as leverage for attaining his objectives in the United Nations and with his European allies. He will probably continue in the same vein.

Despite the debt of gratitude that many Republican legislators have to President Bush for his activism during the campaign, some friction can be expected between the Congress and the White House. This may happen

NOTES

¹ Paul Krugman, "For Richer," 24 October 2002; [nytimes.com/wsiwyg://8http://www.nytimes.com/2002](http://www.nytimes.com/wsiwyg://8http://www.nytimes.com/2002).

² When this article was written, a bill had already been passed in the House and on November 19, the Senate had voted to defeat an amendment proposed by the Democrats that would have limited some of the new department's powers. This defeat means that the bill will probably be approved.