

How the Republicans Were Defeated

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Reuters/John Sommers II

Nobody was surprised by November's U.S. election results. From the start of his second term, President George W. Bush had gone down sharply in the public's estimation. The surveys registered a 39-percent¹ and even a 37-percent approval rating,² one of the lowest levels ever for a president two years from finishing his term in office. The aim of this article is to show how all the problems the Republicans faced in the elections can largely be explained when we analyze the actions of the two fundamental groups that put Bush in the White House for two terms: the neo-conservatives and the religious right. These two groups joined forces to put Bush in office —though once there, the for-

mer concentrated on foreign policy while the latter dedicated themselves to postulating their extreme positions about domestic politics—and are responsible for the change of leadership in both houses of Congress. Before the elections, only 27 percent of the population thought they could trust the government.³

Several problems have been piling up, although undoubtedly the most important one was the Iraq war. At its onset, the Americans underplayed the fact that they never found the infamous weapons of mass destruction because they thought that the world was better off without Saddam Hussein anyway. However, as the years passed and the situation in Iraq became more complicated, the justification for starting the war takes on renewed importance. That is, if the United

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States had scored a rapid victory and withdrawal, making sure of the country's stability, the causes of the war would have been rather irrelevant. However, the more complicated the situation becomes, the more U.S. soldiers die, the further away the end appears to be and the more fragile the original reasons for beginning the war seem. Only 8 percent of the population thinks that the administration is misleading the public about how the war is going.⁴ On the other hand, a rapid withdrawal from Iraq could create conditions for extreme violence and facilitate the creation of a new totalitarian power born of the most fundamentalist and profoundly anti-U.S. groups.

When we look at Iraq as an isolated case, it is difficult to understand how it could have such a decisive impact on the election results. Nevertheless, when we understand the importance of the neo-conservatives in the United States, their actions and their effects make sense in a broader context, beyond the elections. These neo-conservatives have a clear foreign policy position which was reshaped at the end of the Cold War, during which they warned that *détente* was not sufficient *vis-à-vis* the dangerous enemy, the USSR. Rather, they thought a more aggressive policy was required, which was clearly formulated during the Reagan years and consolidated when neo-conservatives came into positions of power, which finally accelerated the fall of the Soviet Union.

From this group's perspective, policy must not be isolationist but active: the United States must impose its power to preserve its hegemony. After 9/11, this hegemony was seriously questioned. So-called preventive war was justified by the need to attack those

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enemies, even entire countries, who in their eyes represented a "threat" to the United States. Then, the justification went beyond that offered by the UN Charter itself, which consists of being able to respond to an attack, since in this case, the mere possibility of a future attack justifies U.S. intervention.

Since it began, the war has been complicated more and more, in part because the administration lacked analytical capability sophisticated enough to understand the complexity of the different groups in Iraqi society. Therefore, what has happened is more understandable when within a whole world strategy the aim is to carry out an active, unilateral foreign policy, and hasty decision-making is explained by seeking a basis for an aggressive foreign policy.⁵

Paradoxically, the neo-conservative justification of the war based on the defense of the values of liberal democracy ends up undermining its own citizens' liberal democratic rights. In order to impose their values on totally different cultures and societies, they enter into a labyrinth of conflicts and contradictions that become unmanageable. Along the way, President Bush got the Patriot Act passed with a bi-partisan vote, and uses it to begin to limit the rights of Americans themselves. As a result, a court order is no longer needed to tap phones, detect key words in personal e-mails on the Internet, locate requests for "dangerous" books, more

easily arrest suspects, use coercion in interrogations and treat newspapers' publishing classified information as a crime.

Richard Poner justifies the president's power in the current situation in the United States and thinks that none of these counter-terrorist measures is unconstitutional.⁶ Regardless of his pragmatic view of the Constitution, which considers that judges' decisions must adjust to the circumstances, without denying that special conditions do exist, what is irrefutable is that the ordinary American is not feeling safer, but rather that because of the war in Iraq, he/she is more vulnerable.⁷ While they feel their freedoms are being threatened by their own government, they also think they have paid a high price but not received sizeable benefits in terms of security. So, society has begun certain attempts to recover democratic freedoms from a government, which, given the predominance of the executive and the Republican control over Congress, cordoned off their rights. The vote was not so much in favor of the Democrats, who presented no clear alternative plan, but against Bush.

From the start of the so-called American experiment, the citizenry created a system of checks and balances to prevent government abuse of the citizen. The public's mandate in voting was to limit the concentration of power in the hands of the president. While they do think the situation is critical due to terrorism and the war against Iraq, they also think that a bi-partisan decision, which implies negotiations and agreements, is better than an "enlightened" decision. Forty-eight percent of the population thinks that it is better to have a president from one party and a Congress dominated by another.⁸

President Bush's second electoral constituency has been religious groups. Conservative, right-wing religious groups focused their goals on domestic politics, and therefore, another issue that has complicated Bush's actions is his religious beliefs. Since its birth as a nation, the United States has been a very religious country, but it has attempted to keep that in the private sphere. Publicly, it has fostered a clear separation between church and state. In the framework of this neo-conservatism, the support of very religious groups has been fervently sought and, despite Bush's efforts, they have been disappointed.

When George W. Bush, a born-again Christian, began his campaign for the presidency in 2000, he said, "I know it won't be easy on me or my family, but God wants me to do it." I believe this statement shows us how important religion would be for this president. Karl Rove was the strategist who helped him get re-elected in 2004, mobilizing the most conservative groups: his promise to hold referendums to block gay marriage or stem cell research led the most conservative groups to go to the polls to vote for George W. Bush. He also said that they "had cultivated the extensive network of religious right organizations, and they were consulted every step of the way as the administration set up its policies on gays, AIDS, condoms, abstinence programs, creationism and other matters that concerned the evangelicals."⁹ In the framework of what he called "compassionate conservatism," President Bush created the so-called "faith-based initiative," despite the fact that the Constitution forbids religious campaigning with public monies, and supported religious ministers' giving sex education, arguing that it was a secular cause. What is more, they created the

White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, which clearly supported religious groups in promoting their values and in bringing them closer to Republicans.¹⁰ The president tried to get a faith-based bill through Congress but failed. One possible explanation is that different religious groups, the Jewish community among them, may have perceived the potential danger of a law that earmarked public funds for religious organizations. Obviously, some religions may be given priority over others. However, the president pushed it through by executive order anyway. President Bush also suggested that schools teach "intelligent design" together with Darwinism. His administration forbade using public money for abortion counseling and promoted abstinence instead of condom use for contraception and AIDS prevention. It only allowed federal funding for stem cell research that was already underway, saying it would not provide more. In addition, Bush used his veto to put a stop to the law that had already been approved by the Republican-dominated houses of Congress.¹¹ Despite these actions aimed at supporting Christian religious groups, many of them felt disappointed by not having won their complete agenda. So, not even the people the president had openly worked for felt satisfied.

This created a great deal of discontent internationally and domestically.¹²

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In addition, the neo-conservatives have differences in their own ranks. Some are not quite so conservative on issues like stem cell research, and others, like part of the religious right, are against an active foreign policy. Paradoxically, it has been said that the right has begun to migrate over to the Democratic side: almost 30 percent of evangelical whites voted for the Democrats, partly because they were unhappy with an activist foreign policy and because of political corruption (the scandals involving Republican legislators and their staffs).¹³

This ideological framework of support from the neo-conservatives and the religious right outlined George W. Bush's policies. In the long run, this has divided society given the neo-conservative hegemony in foreign policy and the domination of the religious right domestically since different social groups feel threatened by the domination of one religion in a society characterized by pluralism in its beliefs.

But we should not forget that while the Democrats won back the two houses of Congress, many of them presented themselves as conservatives in their campaigns. It is interesting to note that many Democrats tried to draw closer to the religious groups talking about values and religion. I think that more than a political realignment toward an extreme Democratic position, the U.S. electorate's intention was to capture the ideological center and reestablish checks and balances in the political system. The issue of the corruption of some Republican legislators, curiously, was almost as important as the war in Iraq, which shows strong disapproval of the hawkish Republican internationalists and the conservative religious groups.

This time, some of the historic rules for U.S. elections played out and others

were jettisoned. The traditional wisdom that says that voters tend to punish a president in the midterm elections of his second term played out: as I said, the votes were against President Bush, against his foreign policy, not a vote based on people's pocketbooks, as is customary, since the economy is in good shape and unemployment has dropped.¹⁴ It was also a vote to urge institutions to recover their capacity to monitor the implementation of decisions and to put checks and balances back into operation. Perhaps the best example of this is the defeat of Democrat Joseph Lieberman in the Connecticut primaries after he voiced his support for the war in Iraq; after that, he decided to run for the Senate as an independent and won the seat. Despite being a conservative, he managed to get elected, showing that the electorate did not vote for a fundamental ideological change, but for reestablishing institutional checks and balances, rejecting a president who has not been successful in Iraq, in Guantanamo, or during the Katrina events, a president who, after inheriting William Clinton's sizeable economic surplus, has let the budget deficit soar to enormous proportions.

In trying to decipher the possible consequences of the midterm Congressional elections for Mexico, we cannot have great expectations. As I already pointed out, many of the Democrats who won are considered conservatives or presented a centrist profile: this was Nancy Pelosi's case, who is now the first woman speaker in U.S. history. Many of them, following the lead of the illustrious symbol of neo-conservatism, Samuel Huntington, see Mexican immigrants as the greatest threat to the United States. Clearly, regardless of which party he belongs to, his idea has permeated U.S.

society. No bill will be easy to get off the ground, and any attempt will require a great deal of negotiating. However, it is also clear that a small window of opportunity can be expected for achieving a bi-partisan agreement in this area in which President Bush may try to show his ability to govern with an opposition Congress.¹⁵

Like with everything else, from Mexico we tend to see problems as the choice between all or nothing, forgetting the differences in the United States. U.S. federalism has great weight and in that context, we have to try to understand possible agreements that could be reached on immigration issues. In the case of Texas, relations have been less difficult than, for example, with Arizona, where the infamous Minutemen were born. Arizona's governor wants to stop the flow of remittances and the federal government wants to punish employers of undocumented immigrants in the state. Timing is also important: Schwarzenegger has maintained an anti-immigrant position, but he just visited Mexico out of concern for California harvests. I think it would be more beneficial to carve out agreements between border states, based on local considerations, and then pressure for a reform by the executive. Constant meetings between border governors might have a bigger impact on a possible immigration bill, which, although probably insufficient, could include Mexico and the United States' main concerns about the issue.

Undoubtedly, the neo-conservatives have taken U.S. foreign policy in the direction of unilateralism and misunderstandings. Hard power has dominated as opposed to other periods when soft power was important.

Given the failure in the mid-term elections, there may be a tendency to re-

turn to the ideological center. The Democrats' control of Congress creates great expectations with regard to immigration, but we should not forget that the unions and other minorities are the Democratic Party constituency, which means that the trend will be instead to carry out small changes because of the need to control the border to ensure national security. **MM**

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¹ A 54-percent approval rating on handling terrorism, 37 percent on foreign policy and the economy and 36 percent on Iraq. *Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

² According to *The New York Times* and the Pew Center.

³ *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sixty-one percent of the population disapproves of the Iraq war.

⁶ David Cole, "How to Skip the Constitution," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LIII, no. 18, November 16, 2006, p. 20.

⁷ Only 39 percent of those surveyed believe that the United States is winning the war on terror and 46 percent believe that the war in Iraq is hurting U.S. ability to win the war on terror. *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

⁸ *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

⁹ Garry Wills, "A Country Ruled by Faith," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LIII, no. 18, November, 2006, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² Fifty-seven percent of all independent voters, and 60 percent of those under 30 voted for the Democrats.

¹³ Before the elections, 41 percent of voters said the scandals had made them feel less favorable about the Republicans retaining a majority in Congress. *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

¹⁴ The UBS/Gallup Index of Investor Optimism rebounded to 74 percent in August, although there is beginning to be a certain fear of a possible slow-down in the economy. *The Public Strategies Report*, October 5, 2006.

¹⁵ Outstanding opponents of immigration in the One-hundred and Tenth Congress are Tom Tancredo (R-CO), Steve King (R-IA), John Culberson (R-TX), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), Nathan Deal (R-GA), Brian Bilbray (R-CA), James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) and Senators John Kyl (R-AZ) and John Inhofe (R-OV). Coming out in favor of the immigrant community are John Conyers (D-MI), Harry Reid (D-NV) and Edward Kennedy (D-MA).