

# Uncertainty marks today's US polls

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THE outcome of the US presidential elections being held today will be too close to call. But in some sections of the American public opinion, there are fears that the result may not be known for several weeks, with the possibility of a lawsuit on voter registration problems and that provisional ballot counting or possibly postal ballots may deciding the fate in a few so-called battleground states.

If current estimates are to be believed, the result of one small Midwestern state, e.g. Wisconsin, going from Bush to Kerry could tip the balance in latter's favour. There are similar situations in some bigger states like Florida, Pennsylvania and Minnesota. Under the peculiar laws of the US system the winner of the popular vote in a state gets all the "electoral votes" of the state.

The electoral college consists of the combined electoral votes assigned to each state respectively on the basis of its population. Thus it is possible, and indeed was the case in the 2000 elections, that the winner of the popular vote may end up losing the elections owing to the arithmetic of the electoral votes. Hence the importance for both candidates of trying to push those states that are just at the edge, over the edge.

It is clear that despite concerns about domestic issues e.g. about jobs going overseas, the ballooning federal debt and the cut-backs in social spending under Mr Bush, the emphasis of the campaign and the voters' primary concerns have been the "war on terror", the war in Iraq, and their own security in a world that they do not comprehend.

The Republican campaign portrayed Senator Kerry as someone who has changed his position on the war in Iraq and cannot be trusted with the security of the country. TV talk shows made fun of his stated intention of taking the world along in such ventures as attacking another country in the pursuit of terrorists, as "seeking their permission" before he acts to protect America's security. Senator Kerry, of course, referred to his war record in Vietnam to establish his patriotic credentials and putting his life on the line as opposed to President Bush whose family con-

troops were able to fend for themselves and the declared plans to establish several US military bases in that country.

The level of unawareness in many Republican voters, as surveys have shown, is such that some still believe that weapons of mass destruction were indeed found in Iraq; that there was some connection between Saddam and the terrorists, while for many others, the US is the target of terrorists for the reason that "they hate our freedoms and our way of life". This irrational fear that Kerry has correctly pointed out, though not identifying it in so many words, remained the single palpable theme of this election. Aware that if this continues to dominate the mind of the electorate he would not be able to unseat the sitting war president, even one as obviously a blunderer as Bush, Kerry emphasizes that he would want people to vote "not for fear but for their hopes".

In a revealing statement President Bush accused his rival "of having a pre-9/11 mentality", seemingly suggesting that the realities of the world have somehow changed fundamentally after that momentous date. One feels sorry for Senator Kerry since he appeared to have realized the folly of his country, at least in trying to take the war to Iraq, but cannot articulate the reasons for this folly in a convincing way for fear of alienating mainstream America.

At the same time, he was unable to satisfy those who wanted a clear statement about the wrong that has been done and what the alternates to Bush's policy are for the next US government. Kerry has thus chosen to target the president for having sidetracked the war against terrorism by defocusing it from Al Qaeda and Osama by attacking Iraq. By implication he means that Iraq had no connection to the attacks against the US, which seem to have become the defining moment of contemporary US history.

Senator Kerry, while highly critical of the decision to go to war, unfortunately could not articulate the domination of the US corporate interests and Israeli political interests in defining this course of action. That would be political suicide in a country where mention of corporate interests wins you the label of "radical" and criticism of

nections enabled him to spend the war years in the safety of National Guard duty in the US.

It was astonishing for an outsider watching these endless debates among partisans from both sides, promoted by media stalwarts whose primary concern, as always, remains network ratings in their cut-throat competition for advertisement money, how little diversity there has been in analysis and discussion.

There was apparently an unwritten agreement between the two parties on not even mentioning some issues that the rest of the world feels are basic to understanding the phenomenon of terrorism as it affects the US. These discussions did not focus on the fact that terrorism is heinous and totally unacceptable for all civilized human beings, not Americans alone. There is also a political dimension to this problem that has to be understood and addressed in the context of the role of the US in the political processes of these countries producing "Islamic" militants. Terrorism is simply taken as an irrational phenomenon to be addressed militarily, in defiance of international laws and obligations, if necessary.

Secondly, no mention is made of the connection of Israel and the Palestinian problem to this terror threat, or of the anti-Americanism that the US's unqualified support to Israel generates in most of the Muslim world.

Another issue made conspicuous by its absence from the discourse is the devastation taking place in Iraq, of the Iraqi people and society. While the loss of American lives in Iraq remains a very sensitive issue, and is apparently creating unease among many people in the US making them feel the echoes of Vietnam; there has been no discussion ever of the horrendous killings and casualties of the Iraqi people in this continuing conflict; no admission of the fact that the US refusal to hand over matters to the UN after the fall of Saddam, is a key factor in fuelling the insurgency there.

While recognizing that no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, there is no remorse over the fact, no sense of wrongdoing, at having invaded a country on the basis of doctored intelligence reports, recognized as such even by key members of the intelligence subcommittee. That key members of the Bush administration were pedalling their own agendas and played havoc with a country that had no connection to the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, found no mention in popular discussions.

It was significant to note that during the course of the presidential debates Senator Kerry pointed out the apparent contradiction between President Bush's statement of withdrawing US troops as soon as the Iraqi

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Israel, that of a "Jew hater".

He has been critical of President Bush's tax cuts to the super-rich and the burden it has put on the middle and lower classes and in doing so has played the populist themes of the Democratic Party, but going by the surveys he has not been able to light a fire due to his very cautious approach. Kerry's constraint, lest we forget, is that the Democratic Party too is funded by some of the same corporations and it too stands to benefit from the control and hegemony over resources and decisions of other countries for which these wars are basically being waged.

It is clear that the elections while being very close shall also witness probably an unprecedented voter turnout in modern times. The black community, in particular, is not going to see itself being disenfranchised as it partially was last time round when thousands of black voters found their names struck of the electoral lists, on one pretext or the other.

Over 20,000 volunteers including over 5,000 lawyers and law students are ready to fight for ensuring a fair chance to their supporters. It thus appears that the wild card in this very tight race is going to be the voter turnout, a very high one most likely favouring Senator Kerry.

One consequence of this enthusiastic involvement of the public, and a positive one at that, is that irrespective of which candidate wins we may expect to see a significant change of US policy regarding unilateral interventions. While a Kerry win shall see him relying more on building a consensus with the allies and the UN, a chastened Bush with a very narrow victory, in an election fought on the issues of Iraq and the war on terror, is not going to be in a position to push through unilateral military agendas without invoking a storm of protest from a very large part of the American public.

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