

The return of George

GIVEN THE STATUS OF THE US AS THE WORLD'S sole super power it is hardly surprising that presidential elections in that country become the focus of global attention. The focus this time was particularly intense given a White House incumbent that much of the world loves to hate. If the world were voting for the office of the US president, it is very clear who the winner would have been. The US electorate, however, came out firmly, though not overwhelmingly, in favour of George W Bush. Not only did Bush edge ahead in the Electoral College votes tally, he led his opponent Senator John Kerry by a margin of over three and a half million in the popular vote. This may not be much, viewed against the backdrop of the total number of voters but is impressive given the context of the 2000 elections when Bush got less of the popular vote than his opponent and was catapulted to the White House courtesy the US Supreme Court. At the time he had run as a right-leaning moderate and it was a widely held view that the policies he had pursued after assuming office did not have the support of a majority of the American people. It was, therefore, thought likely that he would not get a second term in office. However, not only does he have the White House, the Republicans have strengthened their control over the House of Representatives as well as the Senate. It is likely that Bush will interpret this as a popular endorsement of his policies and a mandate

for building on them in line with the conservative agenda. However, it remains to be seen if neo-conservatives such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz have as much of a role in this administration as they did during Bush's first term. Who President Bush nominates to replace the ailing Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court will also indicate whether he intends to reach out to those who do not form a part of his constituency.

Exit polls suggest that a large number of voters saw moral issues as key determinants for their decision to vote a particular candidate. Many of the US commentators and television channels have chosen to look at the phenomenon as a kind of cultural conflict: red America vs blue America. The former is the conservative, given to religiosity, inward-looking geographic heartland of the country comprising the Midwestern plains and the South. Blue America is the more liberal and pluralist part of the population concentrated largely in the Northeast and the West coast. But, this is an oversimplification. For, the divide certainly exists within many of these states as well as these elections have demonstrated. Not infrequently have states gone one way or the other with a difference of around three percentage points in the popular vote. The division has stayed virtually intact from the 2004 elections.

Iraq, exit polls aside, was another major factor

VIEW



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that had a bearing on the campaign. The Bush team succeeded in making security from external threat a key issue in the elections. Bush managed to cast himself in the role of a war president and benefited from a widely-held belief shared even by many of those who saw Iraq as a mess that you do not change leaders in the middle of a war. It did not help that Kerry was not quite able to come up with a position that was substantially different on Iraq. He mentioned the need for allies, particularly in Europe, and UN support. But, this was not enough. The US 'heartland', for the most part, has little time for either. The state of the economy was another factor that was supposed to hinder Bush's chances for re-election. But even though unemployment figures are high, the economy has picked up in the last year or so. And, presumably, for most Americans, the huge budget deficit run up by the Bush administration is a somewhat abstract issue. The important domestic issues such as jobs, taxes and lack of health insurance emphasised by Kerry did not go far enough in galvanising voters. This again is not a mean feat, given the fact that unemployment has risen, a third of the population in the US does not have adequate health cover and here is a 'war president' who takes time out to give substantial tax cuts to the rich.

John Kerry was sometimes referred to during the campaign as George Bush Lite which is to say,

a paler version of the latter. But, the issue is larger now than the candidate: people know what the Republican Party stands for, they are not quite as sure about the Democratic Party. Many of those voting for the latter were simply casting a vote against Bush and for change, any change. It would be interesting to see Hillary Clinton as the candidate for the Democratic Party in 2008 as widely speculated. But given her dim prospects of making inroads into the red heartland, she would have to mobilise her base support to a remarkable degree. Already there are voices suggesting that in order to win the Democrats will need a candidate from the South to mobilise some support also from areas where they were shut out this time.

For the Pakistan government, the election of George Bush comes as a relief. Pragmatism certainly demands that Pakistan have a mutually beneficial working relationship with the US. However, historically, it has been a problematic one. We usually end up going too far out on a limb and frequently find ourselves left in the lurch. Hopefully, our policy makers will be more prudent this time even as they celebrate the return of George W Bush.

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