

Understanding America

USA

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WITH this article I am starting a short series to analyze how America is changing and how this change may influence its relations with a country such as Pakistan. For Pakistan, how America changes politically is of great consequence. President George W. Bush's decisive victory on November 2 and the increased presence of the Republican Party in the two houses of Congress have changed America's political landscape.

George Bush won 59 million votes, or 51 per cent of the total. This was the largest number to have ever voted for a presidential candidate in American history. This large support for Bush was the result of two factors: a larger American population and larger voter turnout compared to the elections of 2000. In 2004, 119.8 million people voted, 14.4 million more than in 2000.

The 2000 presidential election may have been "stolen" in the sense that George W. Bush did not win the majority of the electoral vote; the Supreme Court, whose influential members were appointed by George H.W. Bush, facilitated his son's win in the Electoral College.

riages turned out to be the two most important issues cited by the voters as their reason for favouring Bush over Kerry. The Christian right also responded well to the campaign launched by the Bush team to mobilize their support. These efforts paid off, more than neutralizing similar campaigns by the Democrats.

Is American politics infused with greater commitment to various Christian causes as a result of the reelection of George W. Bush for another term? Americans have always been more religious than the Europeans, with 80 per cent of the country's citizens saying they believe in God and 60 per cent agreeing that "religion plays an important part in my life".

A study by the Washington based Pew Research Centre found that the number of

analyse the data from the elections, what conclusions will they draw for policymaking? In what way will they want to serve their Christian constituency that gave the re-elected president a clear mandate to govern for another four years? Some reference to history may be important in order to answer this question.

Even for a country with a short political history, Americans are always looking for precedence or at the roots thrown in their almost virgin soil to find clues for current events. This is happening in the copious amount of analysis that has been produced in the period since President Bush won a real mandate to govern for four years.

There are three trends already visible in the way America is redefining itself. As discussed above, there is now a greater presence of Protestant evangelicals in

American politics. Two, the greater influence of the evangelicals in the Republican Party may lead it towards the exercise of greater muscular approach towards America's relations with other countries akin to that displayed by the presidency of Andrew Jackson.

Three, President Bush — depending on what happens in Afghanistan and Iraq — may become even more aggressive in pursuing the goals of political reconstruction of what he has sometimes referred to as the Greater Middle East. This is the stretch of land from Morocco in the west to

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win in the Electoral College.

No such claims could be made for the elections held in 2004. In spite of the consensus among pollsters that the election will be very close, President Bush won both the popular and the electoral vote by comfortable margins.

Why did the election of George W. Bush defy so many predictions? Early exit polls predicted victory by Senator John Kerry. No pollster predicted the margin by which George W. Bush actually won. The initial reading of the elections results is that the Christian right vote — not just evangelical Protestants but also Conservative Catholics — came out to vote in much larger numbers than most experts had expected.

This larger turnout went counter to the assumption that larger voter participation generally favours liberal candidates. The finding that the Bush candidacy was favoured by a wide swath of Christian right and not just by evangelical Protestants is important since not all religious groups hold the same views on America's approach to the world outside.

In the presidential elections of 2000, 15 million evangelical Protestants voted. They accounted for 23 per cent of the electorate and 71 per cent of them cast their votes for George W. Bush. According to Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, this group again accounted for 23 per cent of the electorate but this time 78 per cent of them voted for the president. By combining these two sets of numbers, it becomes clear that the evangelical Protestants accounted for 3.5 million extra votes for Bush, or 21 per cent of the additional nine million votes he received in 2004.

However, while this group of Christians received a great deal of attention in the media and in the pre-election analytical work, they were not the only group that gave Bush an easy victory over his opponent. Catholics, with 27 per cent of the total vote, are more numerous than evangelical Protestants and, unusually in 2004, Bush won a majority of their vote, 52 per cent against 47 per cent for Senator John Kerry.

In the past, Catholics have tended to vote for the Democratic Party; this time around the Democrat contesting the election was a Catholic and should have been the favourite of his co-religionists. That did not happen because of Senator Kerry's position on such social issues as abortion rights and gay marriages.

The Christian right turned out in such large numbers to vote for Bush because of their concern with the direction America was taking on a number of social issues as well as their perception of the challenges the country faces from the outside. As already indicated, abortion and gay mar-

Americans who "agree strongly" with the core items of Christian dogma rose significantly between 1965 and 2003. So did the number of those who believe strongly that there are guidelines in scriptures about good and evil and they apply regardless of circumstances.

"Polls conducted by the Gallop organization in the 1960s found that over half of all Americans thought that churches should not be involved in politics. Now, over half of them think that they can be." To these groups of people President Bush's use of good and evil as the guiding principles of policy and his frequent references to God motivating his actions held a special appeal.

What does this changed landscape imply for the Muslim world in general and how would it affect Pakistan in particular? Do the triumph of President Bush and the increased presence of the Christian evangelicals in the Republican Party mean that the United States will develop a less accommodating approach towards other religions, even towards other sects of Christianity? How would the strong religious base of the second Bush administration translate into America's world outlook? Will there be hostility towards Islam and Muslim countries in the next four years? These are important questions. Before answering them, it would be useful to review what the Americans themselves think happened on November 2, 2004.

While the number of voters from Christian right who favoured Bush in the elections will have an influence on his policies, there are two other changes that have occurred in the American political landscape that will be of some consequence, not only in the way the country shapes itself but also on how it tries to influence the outside world. The first of these is the "Christianization" of the Republican Party. The proportion of evangelicals calling themselves Republicans has risen from 48 per cent to 56 per cent over the past 12 years, making them the most solid segments of the party's base. The religious wing of the Republican Party will attempt to influence to an even greater extent President Bush's foreign policy during his second term.

The departure of the moderate Colin Powell from the State Department and his replacement by Condoleezza Rice will probably strengthen the hand of this wing of the party. Not only is Rice very close to Bush, she comes from the south and is the daughter of a priest. Powell, on the other hand, was from the north, and influenced to some extent by the liberalism of that part of America.

As President Bush and his powerful political advisors sit down and begin to

Morocco in the west to Pakistan in the east and contains 80 per cent of the world's Muslim population. I will deal with each of these three trends before applying them to America's relations with Pakistan.

How will the evangelical influence on foreign policy shape the second Bush administration's attitude towards the Muslim world? This group holds "highly distinctive foreign-policy views: seven in 10 say America has a special role in the world and two-thirds think America should support Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians." It is largely on account of this view of the world in addition to President Bush's religiosity and the way he reads the Christian scripture himself, that America has followed a clearly pro-Israel approach in recent years in its Middle East policy.

As such, it has lost its ability to play the honest-broker role that was the hallmark of the way the Israel-Palestinian dispute was handled by the previous US administrations. Since this dispute is central to the concerns of the Muslim world — a fact now also recognized by British Prime Minister Tony Blair who is a stout supporter of President Bush's policies in the Middle Eastern region — Washington's persistence in what is generally viewed as a bias towards the Jewish state will not ease its relations with the Muslim countries.

It does not seem possible that Washington under President Bush will be prepared to address the main Palestinian concerns. The Palestinians wish Israel to withdraw from the territories it conquered in 1967, for Jerusalem to become the joint capital of the states of Israel and Palestine, and for some right of return for the Palestinians displaced from their homes when the Jewish state was founded in 1948. They also want Palestinians to have full sovereignty in managing their affairs, including defence, foreign relations, and economic management. Israel, under the present leadership, has a very different set of interests, some of them of great consequence for the Muslim world. The most important of these is the future of the city of Jerusalem, the second most sacred site for Islam. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's declaration soon after the death of Yasser Arafat that he did not believe that a fully independent Palestinian state would emerge in the next two decades did little to assuage the highly bruised feelings in the Muslim world.

Will America adopt a more accommodating towards other countries with large Muslim populations or are we seeing a distinct hardening of attitude towards the Muslim world? I will address this question next week.