



A Defeat for Republicans, Not Conservatives

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Europe's left-wingers are elated about the outcome of the recent mid-term elections in the United States. Indeed, newspapers across the continent greeted the news that Democrats have gained control of the US House and Senate with jubilation. Germany's reliably anti-American *Der Spiegel* surmised that the Democratic sweep heralds the beginning of a new era in US foreign policy. Spain's leftist *El País*, notoriously better at sensationalism than solid journalism, ran a simplistic headline reading: "US Sentences the Bush Era". Oh really?

As the Euro-press confuses wishful thinking with news analysis, some Europeans may be left with the impression that the Democratic victory implies big changes ahead in American foreign and domestic policies. Some may even be led to believe that American voters are

somehow becoming more like Europeans in their worldview. But they would be mistaken...badly mistaken.

In fact, Europeans should not expect any major changes from the United States during the next two years. This is because although Republicans were defeated at the polls, conservatives certainly were not.

Some post-election facts: Democrats have taken the Senate by a one-vote majority, the thinnest possible margin (a switch of less than 1,500 votes in Montana would have kept the Senate deadlocked 50-50). And Joe Lieberman, a conservative Democrat scorned by many anti-war liberals for his support of the American intervention in Iraq, was easily re-elected in left-leaning Connecticut. He now holds the balance of power in the Senate.

Democrats also won 29 House seats, well below the average for similar political cycles. But many of the gains were by conservative Democrats who replaced moderate Republicans. Indeed, in a clever electoral strategy called triangulation, the Democratic Party has welcomed conservative Democrats into their tent. Thus *both* Democrats and Republicans moved to the right, not the left, in this election.

But that's not all. The Democratic majority was elected, in large part, from Republican-leaning districts and states. Democrats also captured 28-percent of the votes of evangelical Christians (who are especially despised by godless yet 'sophisticated' European intellectuals). Moreover, seven out of eight anti-gay marriage amendments to state constitutions passed, while ballot initiatives in nine other states passed referendums dear to conservative voters. This is hardly a sentencing of the Bush era.

Unlike Europe, with its left-wing Socialists and right-wing ultranationalists, there are very few ideological extremes in American politics. Indeed, American elections normally are fought on a narrow ideological field, which by all measures is decidedly centre-right. Thus American elections generally produce relatively mild swings one way or the other (as evidenced by the relatively close outcomes of recent presidential elections). For this reason, among others, the Democratic victory is not a realignment of American politics; it will not usher

in any great structural changes to the American system.

Nor will the shift in power from Republicans to Democrats make a big difference in policymaking. Because most major legislation requires 60 votes in the Senate, the practical implication of the 51-49 advantage for the Democrats is quite limited. And in both chambers, Democrats are unlikely to be able to line up the two-thirds majorities needed to override a presidential veto.

In any case, the 2006 mid-term election was driven not by ideology but by issues, namely corruption and Iraq. One-third of the Republican losses in the House came in congressional districts where the party had been tainted by scandal. And although Democrats have had their fair share of malefactors, as the party in power, Republicans were held to a higher standard. The political shake-up simply reaffirms the vitality of America's two-party system.

It is also true that the conflict in Iraq is unpopular with voters. But the majority of Americans are not against the war per se. Instead, they are unhappy with the conduct of the war. Indeed, exit polls show that most voters oppose an endless intervention with no victory in sight. Moreover, most Americans have long shared the neo-conservative frustration with Donald Rumsfeld, the soon-to-be-departing defense secretary, for showing too little commitment to winning in Iraq. But the primary immediate effect of Rumsfeld's resignation (itself a ma-

major victory not only for the neocons but for conservatives of all stripes) is that it will deprive Democrats of an erstwhile easy target for criticism. With an eye on the presidential elections in 2008, Democrats will now be keen to exercise moderation in order to demonstrate that they have matured as a governing party. Thus although congressional Democrats will seek greater vigilance over the intervention in Iraq, the party's foreign policy establishment understands that a precipitous withdrawal of American troops would be potentially damaging not only to US interests, but also those of the Democratic Party.

Indeed, European lefties are living in a fantasy world if they think that the United States will abandon Iraq (or the resistance to Islamic fascism) anytime soon. This is because most Americans (be they Democrats or Republicans) do not share the appeasement mentality so pervasive among Europeans. On the contrary, the Democratic victory is likely to pull the rug out from under the shallow idealism of European pacifists. Like the Democrats, they have been quick to lash out at the Bush Administration for any and every perceived shortcoming, but shamefully unable to offer serious alternatives.

But now that Democrats will become partners in governing, they will need to come up with convincing strategies of their own. In this context, they are likely to pressure Europeans for greater financial and

military support in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Thus as the Democrats, who are acutely vulnerable to charges of being weak on national security, push for an end to the free-riding of the European left, the latter will come to see that their propagandist gloating over the Republican defeat has been very shortsighted indeed. In any case, the president will continue to assert his constitutional role in foreign policy. This means that America will continue to be assertive abroad.

As any serious observer of American politics understands, the conservative movement is the most successful enterprise in US political history. The fact that Democrats are becoming social conservatives (with many staking positions far to the right of some Republicans not only on foreign policy like Iran but also on domestic issues like abortion, gun control, illegal immigration, same-sex marriage and wasteful government spending) implies that even with a split government, America will remain solidly a centre-right country.

Europeans should take note: Although the balance of political power in Washington has shifted from Republicans to Democrats, American conservatism is, and will continue to be, the primary ideological force driving US domestic and foreign policies. In the final analysis it's just like Margaret Thatcher says: "The facts of life are always conservative". To believe otherwise is wishful thinking.