



28 August 2006

**Marcin ZABOROWSKI**

## **Mid-Term Elections in the US: In the Shadow of Iraq**

The approaching mid-term elections (due to take place on 7 November) to both Houses of the Congress and a number of state governorships may deliver a considerable change in the US and have an impact on its foreign policy. The elections are likely to be extraordinary in two significant aspects. It is widely expected that the Democrats will score considerable gains, probably becoming a majority party in the House of Representatives and making some gains in the Senate. This would be a major achievement for the party, given that the Republicans (or GOP) have uninterruptedly controlled the Congress since 1994. Secondly, very unusually for the Congressional elections, foreign policy occupies a prominent place in the campaigns of both parties. In fact, many pundits see the elections as a referendum on the war in Iraq. The elections are also an indication of issues and preferences that are likely to shape the 2008 Presidential challenge.

### **The contest and its implications**

There are 33 Senate races, with Democrats defending 18 seats and Republicans 15. All 435 House of Representatives seats are up for election. Democrats need to pick up 15 seats to take control of the House and 6 to gain a majority in the Senate. The odds are clearly against the Republicans. Historical record shows that the party holding the White House suffers big losses even when its president is popular. The best any party has done whilst its president was unpopular was to lose only 15 seats in 1978 (under President Carter), which is exactly the number that the Democrats need to win to take control of the House.

A consolation for President Bush is that he managed to break this historical trend in 2002 and 2004 when the GOP not only held onto its seats but won extra seats in the Senate and the House. However, the President's approval ratings were high then – above 60 percent – there was broad support for the war in Iraq and the Democrats were on the defensive. This time around, Bush's popularity has dropped to 33-39 percent (depending on the polls), the Iraq war is deeply unpopular and the GOP is mired in corruption scandals.

Should the Democrats hold their advantage until Election Day, the implications of the change would be considerable, especially given the current trend towards increased partisanship. The President's room for manoeuvre would be severely circumvented and it is difficult to see a Democrat-controlled House approving some of the presidential initiatives concerning the 'war on terror', such as the increased finance for the troops in Iraq or further curtailing of civil liberties. However, the greatest implications of the change would be domestic, a clear indication that the rise of conservative fortunes (uninterrupted since 1994) is in reverse and further contributing to the perception that President Bush is a 'lame duck'.

## Key issues of the campaign

As always, the issues of the campaign underline voters' domestic, often local, concerns; however, foreign policy has come to feature unusually prominently in the arguments of both parties. Naturally, the top domestic issue is the state of the economy. The GOP should have stood on firm ground here. Under the Bush presidency the economy has grown, creating many new jobs. However, the fruit of this economic expansion has not spread proportionally throughout the nation, benefiting the wealthy predominantly but with little improvement in living standards for the vast majority of Americans.<sup>1</sup> In addition, and this is where foreign policy starts to kick in, the entire nation has been affected by high oil prices – in part as a result of continuing instability in Iraq and the tensions in relations with Iran. Prices at the pump have always been a 'hot potato' in American politics and an issue that has a direct impact directly on voters.

The other domestic issues of the elections include immigration,<sup>2</sup> corruption and lobbying scandals,<sup>3</sup> health care reform and, of course, a host of local matters. However, it is the issue of Iraq and the broader 'war on terror' that so far catches the headlines and seems to be dominating the campaign. The war is now perceived by the majority of the population as a mistake. The news from Iraq is almost uniformly dismal and despite Bush's efforts to underscore progress in the war, there is little doubt that the White House is losing the public relations battle over the issue.

Iraq and the 'war on terror' are of course international issues that in normal circumstances would be unlikely to influence voters' preferences in mid-term elections. However, national security issues featured prominently in the 2002 and 2004 elections and were widely considered to be a pivotal factor then. This time around there is much evidence that the issue is already dominating the debate, not least because both parties have picked it up as their top argument.

## Which party makes Americans feel more secure?

Since 9/11 the key question in American politics has been homeland security. The campaign has already produced some shifts in attitudes towards the issue among both parties and especially the Democrats. Until recently, most Americans were of the view that whilst the Democrats were better at managing the economy it was the Republican party and President Bush that made them feel more secure. In the age of terrorism this perception has given the Republicans a clear advantage, putting the Democrats on the defensive and becoming the source of a split within the party. Whilst few Democrats have opposed the war in Iraq, a clear majority has supported President Bush, a decision that some of them – such as 2004 presidential challenger John Kerry and his running mate John Edwards – came to regret.

However, as the Iraq war has become ever less popular the anti-war lobby has gained strength in the party. Two months ago John Kerry and Russ Feingold sponsored legislation calling for withdrawal from Iraq by July 2007.<sup>4</sup> The vote was defeated with some prominent Democrats (such as Hillary Clinton) voting against it, nevertheless it has attracted the support of the majority of Democratic senators. More recently, the party's ambivalence on the war was directly challenged during the primaries in Connecticut where the pro-war Democrat Joseph Lieberman was defeated by political novice Ned Lamont who campaigned on a platform of opposition to the war in Iraq.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, after adjusting for inflation the wages of an average American worker have grown only by 1% since 2000 whilst in the previous five years they had grown by 6% - see *The Economist* Special Report on 'Inequality in America', 17 June 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of the GOP oppose Bush's proposal to grant amnesty to some of the 10 million illegal migrants. On the importance of this issue in the campaign, see 'In porous border, GOP sees an opening', *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The Abramoff lobbying scandal has brought down the House majority leader Tom Delay (R-Tex) and has tarnished the GOP. On the impact of the issue see: 'The Abramoff echo', *The Washington Post*, 7 August 2006.

<sup>4</sup> 'John Kerry and Russ Feingold to Offer Amendment with Deadline to Redeploy U.S. Combat Troops From Iraq', <http://kerry.senate.gov/v3/cfm/record.cfm?id=257433&>.

A former vice-presidential candidate and a three-term senator, Lieberman was a clear favourite in the race – not least because the leadership of the Democratic Party had lined up behind him, with former president Bill Clinton campaigning on the senator's behalf. At the same time, Ned Lamont received no help from the Democratic party and had to spend his own money to stay in the race. Lamont's surprise victory in the primaries and Lieberman's decision to run as an Independent have subsequently caused something of an earthquake in US politics. Most heavyweights in the Democratic Party – such as John Kerry, Howard Dean and even Hillary Clinton – are now supporting Lamont, making donations and raising money for his campaign. In the meantime, the GOP and President Bush are endorsing Lieberman and withdrawing their support for the Republican challenger Alan Schlesinger.

Most importantly, the Connecticut primary has changed the dynamic of the elections – with the issues of foreign policy and national security becoming the central theme of the debate. The Republicans have jumped on the chance to portray Ned Lamont's victory as the proof that the Democratic party has moved to the left, becoming ever less reliable on security. Citing the primaries and the foiled UK terrorist plot (which occurred within a day of each other) Vice-President Cheney argued that Lamont's victory aided 'Al-Qaeda types' and was making America less secure.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, President Bush stressed that there would be 'no cutting and running in Iraq' as, allegedly, some Democratic leaders would wish.<sup>6</sup>

Even some pro-war Democrats, such as Hillary Clinton, have been portrayed by their Republican opponents as irresponsible leftists whose naïve actions aid the terrorists. In a commercial run by Clinton's likely opponent, John Spencer, she is shown together with Osama bin Laden – an image designed to suggest that there is a connection between the two.<sup>7</sup>

The Democrats remain upbeat, however, seeing Lamont's victory as an indication of the changing mood in the country and an encouragement to criticise Bush's foreign policy more boldly. In the poll released after the primaries, 79% of Democrats nationwide said that they were happy with the result and 70% were of the view that the vote made the Democratic party stronger heading into the November elections.<sup>8</sup> The Senate minority leader Harry Reid commented on the race, arguing that it is a clear indication that too close an association with President Bush (as practised by Lieberman) hurts politically. John Kerry argued that US 'troops in Iraq would benefit from Lamont's leadership'.<sup>9</sup>

It is still unclear whether Lamont's victory in the primaries will benefit or rather harm the Democrats' national standing. In fact, it is not even clear whether Lamont will eventually win the seat on Election Day. However, there is no doubt that the Connecticut primary has changed the dynamics of the elections, emboldening the antiwar movement whilst uniting the GOP around their hardline security discourse.

## Implications for the EU

Whilst the elections have few direct implications for the Europeans, a change of the guard at Capitol Hill would affect US foreign policy, which would be of consequence for the EU. A Democrat-controlled House (and perhaps an increased representation in the Senate) would be likely to bring in the following changes:

- The new House would be a generally more moderate foreign policy legislator than the current one, which is, in fact, to the right of the White House. The House's most hawkish legislation, such as the Iran Freedom Act or the resolutions concerning China, would be likely to be toned down.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Who's guilty of "petty partisanship"?', *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2006.

<sup>6</sup> 'Bush: no "cut and run" in Iraq', *Newsmax.com*, 16 August 2006.

<sup>7</sup> 'Hillary "Outraged" by bin Laden Ad', *Newsmax.com*, 17 August 2006.

<sup>8</sup> 'Zogby: Democrats pleased with Lieberman defeat', *Newsmax.com*, 11 August 2006.

<sup>9</sup> 'Democrats Counter GOP and Lieberman on Iraq', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2006.

<sup>10</sup> For the background of the Iran Freedom Act see the following note: Marcin Zaborowski, 'Mobilising EU - US foreign policy co-operation: EU diplomacy, the Middle East and Eastern Europe', 15 May 2006, [www.iss-eu.org](http://www.iss-eu.org)

- Whilst the current House is a bastion of unilateralism and expresses little interest in working with the EU, this would be likely to change in the event of a Democratic victory.
- A vote calling on the President to present a timetable for the withdrawal from Iraq would be likely to be pushed through.

Beyond the changes at the level of the House, it is clear that a new and strengthened Democratic representation at the Congress would weaken President Bush whilst solidifying the Democratic platform in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2008.