

The American Elections

On November 2, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, voters in the United States will vote to elect a President and a Vice President. While this election is the one that has attracted the most public attention, there will also be simultaneous¹ elections for all 435 members of the House of Representatives, 34 of the 100 Senators, and 11 of the 50 state governors. In addition, state legislatures² in almost all of the states will elect the majority of their members. Many localities will also be electing county and city councils, water and soil commissions, auditors, some state judges and a whole host of other positions. In 2004, a major portion of the elected offices in the United States will be up for grabs.

The Presidential election

As the controversial election of 2000 highlighted to the world, American presidential elections are not necessarily won by the candidate who receives the most votes. Rather, an Electoral College³ decides who becomes President with the electors⁴ chosen at the state level. Each state receives electoral votes equal to its representation in the US Congress and the District of Columbia (whose delegates to Congress have no vote) is allocated⁵ three electoral votes. A majority of 270 out of the 535 votes in the Electoral College is necessary to win the Presidency. Electors are chosen as a group from each state. That is, if George Bush has more votes than John Kerry in Florida then all 27 of Florida's electors will be the electors who are pledged⁶ to support Bush. Two states, Maine and Nebraska, complicate matters somewhat by allocating their electoral votes based upon their Congressional districts, with the winner of each Congressional district receiving one elector. The state-wide winner gets a bonus of two electors. To further complicate the election, voters in Colorado are voting on a referendum⁷ that would allocate its electors proportionately, a decision that would apply to this election. So, instead of the winner of the popular vote in Colorado getting all nine of Colorado's electoral votes, the nine votes would be split proportionately⁸ among the candidates. In practice this would give five votes to the winner and four to the loser. Had such a system been in place in 2000, Al Gore would have gotten four electoral votes from Colorado and been elected President.

The populations of many American states are either solidly right-of-center or solidly left-of-center and this provides each party with a bedrock level of support. Democrats run particularly well in New England, the Mid-Atlantic States and the Pacific Coast. Together they would provide Kerry with at least 211 electoral votes. Republicans tend to do best in the South and West. This gives Bush at least 206 electoral votes. This leaves 118 electoral in 11 so-called "battleground states", primarily in the Midwest, that will determine the election. The five largest of these

¹ samtidig

² parlamentær

³ valgmandskollegium

⁴ valgmand

⁵ tildeles

⁶ forpligtet

⁷ afstemning

⁸ forholdsmæssigt

states are Florida (27), Ohio (20), Michigan (17), Wisconsin (10), Minnesota (10). Polls from before the first presidential debate gave President Bush a slight edge⁹ in these states, but a shift of only 1 or 2 percentage points would swing several of them, their electors, and the election itself, to Senator Kerry.

The major issues¹⁰ in the election are the war in Iraq, terrorism and the sluggish¹¹ pace of the economic recovery. President Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was well-received by most Americans and they give him high marks in the polls for his handling of the War on Terror. Opinion is more divided on the war in Iraq and Senator Kerry has sought to divorce that war from the War on Terror, arguing that it was Osama bin Ladin and his supporters that attacked the United States rather than Saddam Hussein. Troubles with the ongoing occupation are also undermining the president's campaign. The economy has also hurt President Bush in the battleground states as they have lost several hundred thousand jobs since he came into office. Indeed, he is the first president in 75 years to have presided over a net¹² loss of jobs in his term of office. This, too, has provided opportunities for Senator Kerry to attack the President's stewardship¹³ of the economy.

While President Bush and Senator Kerry are the two major party candidates, there are also other candidates on the ballots¹⁴ in many states. Ralph Nader, a consumer advocate, is on the ballot in many states and many commentators believe that his campaign siphons¹⁵ votes away from the Democrats. Had Nader not been on the ballot as the Green Party's candidate in 2000, it is likely that many of his environmentalist supporters would have voted for Gore and their votes could easily have been enough for Gore to have won the states of Florida and New Hampshire. In 2004, the Democrats are trying to raise as many barriers to Nader as possible, especially in the battleground states. On the right of the political spectrum, the Libertarians¹⁶ are fielding candidates in many states and it is possible that sizeable turnout for the Libertarians could deprive¹⁷ President Bush of enough votes in Arizona to enable Senator Kerry to win that state under the United States' "first-past-the-post" plurality electoral system.

Televised debates between the Democratic and Republican candidates have been a major recurring¹⁸ feature of American presidential campaigns since 1976. The first modern presidential debates were held in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon and they were restored in 1976 when Jimmy Carter challenged Gerald Ford. The debates themselves have played a crucial¹⁹ role in the campaigns, reinforcing or

⁹ fortrin

¹⁰ spørgsmål

¹¹ langsom

¹² netto

¹³ ledelse

¹⁴ stemmeseddel

¹⁵ fjerner

¹⁶ The Libertarian Party is committed to America's heritage of freedom:

■ individual liberty and personal responsibility

■ a free-market economy of abundance and prosperity

■ a foreign policy of non-intervention, peace, and free trade.

¹⁷ fratage

¹⁸ tilbagevendende

¹⁹ afgørende

changing opinions about candidates. Senator Kerry was widely seen as the “winner” of the first presidential debate with a performance that was considered “Presidential” while President Bush’s apparent disinterest²⁰, bursts of frustration and peculiar body language undermined the content of his arguments. Four years ago, it was Al Gore’s sighs and odd behaviour that reflected poorly on him in contrast to then Governor Bush. Since 1976, the candidate who is seen as the “winner” of the debates has gone on to win the general election in November.

In the unlikely event that no candidate receives 270 votes or above in the Electoral College, the United States House of Representatives would select the President, with each state casting a single vote. The Senate would select the Vice President. The last time that this selection procedure was used was in 1824 when John Quincy Adams, son of one-term (1796-1800) President John Adams, was selected over Andrew Jackson and several other candidates.

Senate races

One-third of the 100 member United States Senate is elected every two years; and in 2004, there are 34 Senate seats that are open. Each state is allotted two Senators and they are elected by the voters in their state. The Senate is currently²¹ controlled by the Republican Party which has 51 seats to the 48 controlled by the Democrats. There is one independent (Senator Jim Jefford of Vermont) who typically votes with the Democrats. Of the 34 seats that are due to be elected this fall, 19 of them are currently held by the Democratic Party while only 15 are held by the Republicans. To gain control of the Senate, the Democrats would need to have a net gain²² at least one seat. In the event of a tie²³, the Vice President casts the tie-breaking ballot. So if George Bush is re-elected, Dick Cheney would cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of Republican control of a Senate split 50-50. The Democrats would thus need to pick up two seats to gain control of the Senate in the event of a Bush victory.

One of the two most interesting races promises to be the closest in the nation – the battle in South Dakota between the Democrats leader in the Senate, Senator Tom Daschle, and his challenger, John Thune. Thune lost a Senate race against South Dakota’s other Senator by a mere 527 votes in 2002. South Dakota, with 750,000 residents, is one of the least populous states in the country, yet both candidates are spending over \$10 million on their race. The second most interesting race will be the most lopsided²⁴ – in Illinois. The Democratic nominee, Barack Obama, was the keynote speaker at the Democrats’ national convention and is easily the front-runner, polling around 70% of the vote. The Republican candidate, Alan Keyes, is a former ambassador and Reagan Administration official who has previously run for the Republican presidential nomination and twice run unsuccessfully for Senate in the state of Maryland. Both Keyes and Obama are eloquent²⁵ speakers, but Keyes’ extremely conservative positions are creating a lot of media attention in relatively

²⁰ mangel på interesse

²¹ p.t.

²² gevinst

²³ uafgjort

²⁴ ude af balance

²⁵ veltalende

liberal Illinois. As both candidates are African-American, it seems likely that Illinois will elect the only African-American to the United States Senate.

House races

The House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the US Congress, elects all of its members to two-year terms in 2004. The Republican Party currently holds a narrow majority in the House, with 229 seats to 205 for the Democrats (there is one independent from Vermont who tends to support the Democrats). The Democrats would need to gain 12 seats to win control of the House. Although a Kerry landslide could sweep additional Democrats into the House, this is seen as unlikely. A recent redistricting of House seats in the wake²⁶ of the 2000 census²⁷ has enabled many Republican state legislatures, particularly Texas' legislature, to draw district boundaries²⁸ to favor Republican House candidates. Most incumbents²⁹ are in safe seats, so in practice there are probably about 40 House seats (just under 10% of the total) that will be competitive in the 2004 elections.

The presidential campaign can have a modest effect on House races; Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in 1980 swept many Democratic Representatives from power and enabled him to construct a working majority in the legislature between Republicans and conservative Democrats. A decisive win for either Bush or Kerry in the election could have similar consequences for House races; however, the close nature of the presidential race suggests that there will be no nation-wide tide of sentiment for one party or another. In these circumstances, it is likely that most House races will be decided primarily on the basis of local issues.

Local races and referenda

Across the United States, every state is having local elections for state legislatures, eleven are electing governors and many are voting on specific propositions and referenda³⁰. At the moment, California has eleven referenda scheduled for the November ballot, including one on bond initiatives for children's hospitals and another on the establishment of a state-wide DNA database on felons³¹ and sex offenders. South Carolina is voting on whether to allow bars to serve hard liquor in containers other than mini-bottles, and Arizona voters will vote on a scheme of mandatory³² identification for various public services in an effort to crack down on illegal immigration.

Localities have their own elections for everything from town mayors to school boards. Many areas empower local electorates to raise taxes on everything from a local sales tax (usually limited to one penny on the dollar) to property taxes. City councils and school boards also often possess certain revenue raising powers for items

²⁶ kølvand

²⁷ folketælling

²⁸ grænser

²⁹ indehaver af hverv

³⁰ folkeafstemninger

³¹ forbrydere

³² tvungen

like hotel and amenity³³ taxes to business rates and even, in larger cities, a local income tax. In years such as 2004 that have federal elections, turnout³⁴ is approximately 50% of the eligible. This might be considered low by most European standards (Britain and Switzerland being the exceptions), but fairly high when considering that half the voters actually do bother to vote for their local water and soil commissioner.

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³³ luksus

³⁴ fremmøde