American political lessons for Australia?

By Geoff Robinson - posted Friday, 3 November 2006

On November 7 Americans will go to the polls to elect 435 members of the House of Representatives and 33 senators. Republicans have controlled the House of Representatives since 1994 and the Senate during the same period apart from 2000-02.

If US presidential elections are truly American extravaganzas then Congressional elections are more like Australian parliamentary elections. There are differences, in particular personal votes count for a lot more (although perhaps mostly by the inflation of margins in safe seats), but since 1946 on average about 48.5 per cent of the two-party vote has given the Democrats a Congressional majority.

The Democrats have enjoyed a consistent lead in national polls and if this is carried to Election Day they will secure a majority in the House of Representatives.

As in Australia some marginal seats will resist the trend but others above the arc of swing will be swept away.

The Senate will be more difficult; the Democrats are starting well behind and to achieve a majority will require victory in Republican-leaning states such as Virginia and Tennessee. The Democrats are favoured in some of the doubtful Senate races but it remains unlikely they can win them all.

The Republicans are polling badly because voters consider the Democrats better suited to handle almost every issue, notably the Iraq war: they even level-peg with the Republicans on terrorism.

In the past the Republicans have won political success by ignoring the middle ground and mobilising conservative voters to turn out, but against the backdrop of general disillusionment with the Republicans this strategy has largely exhausted itself. A neglected truth of politics is that although voters may be wrong they are...
usually rational.

Self-professed conservatives outnumber liberals three to two in the US but many conservatives have decided that the Republican version of conservatism is too conservative for them. The Republicans are beginning to find that their party cannot indefinitely keep western libertarians, southern conservatives and white suburban professionals together under the same tent.

The surprisingly incoherent Republican campaign began with an attempt to rally opinion behind George Bush as military leader, then shifted to a focus on local campaigns and has now retreated to an attempt to rally core conservative voters by evoking the spectre of liberal judges approved by a Democratic congressional majority.

The Republican position is further undermined by economic factors. Contrary to popular views the US is a country in which economic class plays a larger role in determining political views than elsewhere.

Real wages have failed to increase under Bush while personal debt has grown. The Democrats receive credit, perhaps undeserved, for the rise in wages that occurred under the Clinton boom.

If the economy is more important in explaining American politics than most realise, culture is less important. In recent polls Democrats are the preferred party on cultural issues, even the hot-button issues of abortion rights and gay marriage. True many Democrats are confused and ambivalent in their positions on these issues but here they may be closer to the middle ground of a confused and ambivalent electorate than the hard cultural right.

Much of the campaigning impetus for the Democrats in 2006 has been provided by a revitalised and reformed left of the party, in the form of the blog-centered "netroots" represented by sites such as Daily Kos, MyDD and Swing State Project. Participants in the netroots have sought to move on from anger and despair at successive Republicans victories towards concerted political action: they have taken the success of the Republican right as a model, inspired by its determined march from the 1980s fringe to the mainstream.

But the problem for the netroots is that voters are unlikely to rush from Republican right to Democratic left. A Democratic majority would not be a mandate for a major shift left of centre, although given how far the Republicans have positioned themselves right of centre it would be a mandate for a substantial shift in public policy.

The Democrat House of Representatives caucus is ideologically diverse, currently divided between the 37 member "Blue Dog" caucus of moderate to conservative Democrats; the 61 member Progressive Caucus whose manifesto for a "just and humane society" would enthuse members of the Australian Greens; and between these two poles a majority of party centrist looking to the "third way" Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) whose guiding star remains Bill Clinton.

The task of uniting the Democrats in opposition has been surprisingly well-handled by San Francisco liberal and Democrat leader Nancy Pelosi who would become Speaker if the Democrats won. Pelosi has worked hard to encourage House Democrats to "just say no" to controversial Republican initiatives. In 2005 the House Democrats were the most united in 50 years in their voting record.

In the run-up to these elections Democrats were divided on whether to put forward a comprehensive policy manifesto or to focus on the wrongdoings of the Republicans. Overall they have tended towards the small target strategy but have announced a pledge to raise the minimum wage, expand assistance for college tuition, oppose the privatisation of Social Security, reduce the price of prescription drugs, and support stem-cell research.

It will be difficult to extend this into a more comprehensive progressive agenda due to divisions in the party. The Progressive Caucus' dream to make the US into a 1970s-style European social democracy lacks broad support, and the DLC's third way style preoccupation with education and training is worthy but unlikely to inspire.

Among many Democratic voters, especially blue-collar and lower-income conservatives, there is substantial sympathy for protectionism, but Bill Clinton was a staunch free trader. There is however strong support across the party for labour