

THE BATTLE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

As Indo-US engagement deepens, New Delhi is also increasingly sensitive to the political developments within the United States. Understanding the internal dynamics in the US from an Indian perspective has become an urgent necessity for the Indian policy and business communities. The United States Studies Programme of the Observer Research Foundation hopes to meet this requirement. The *ORF Monitor* aims to provide a weekly assessment on the November elections to the White House. We welcome comments and suggestions on the Monitor.



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Iraq as a Factor in the US Presidential Race

By Chintamani Mahapatra

Never before has the issue of US military activities abroad occupied as central a place in US election campaigns as is being witnessed now. Even a few months ago, analysts in the United States and abroad were not prepared to accept the view that Iraq would be one of the dominant issues in the election.

But now there is no second opinion on this issue. Right through the current election campaign, including in the party conventions and the presidential debates, Iraq has been the predominant issue of contention. The differences between President George Bush and Democratic contender John Kerry on this issue are sharp, pointed and distinct.

President Bush has been laying down his argument along the following lines. To begin with, his decision to intervene in Iraq was central to his overall war against global terrorism. Secondly, Saddam Hussein was a danger to the Iraqi people, to the American people and to the world. Thirdly, for quite some time, Iraq has been identified as one of the countries sponsoring terrorism. Fourthly, Saddam Hussein had the knowledge, ability and intention to develop weapons of mass destruction and he could have transferred such weapons to terrorist groups. He cheated the UN weapons inspectors and lied to them about his intentions. Finally, Bush says that the removal of Saddam Hussein has made the US and the world safer.

John Kerry's views on Iraq are equally hard hitting. First, President Bush has been fighting the wrong war at the wrong place and the wrong time. Osama Bin Laden should have been the prime target in the war on terror, not Saddam Hussein. Secondly, military intervention in Iraq ended up diverting resources and focus from Afghanistan and the war on terrorism. Thirdly, while sending troops to Iraq, President Bush ignored the UN, did not give diplomacy adequate time and failed to get the

support of important American allies. Fourthly, Iraq has become messy and chaotic. More than a thousand Americans have died there, several thousands have suffered injuries, reconstruction activities are facing enormous obstacles, Iraqis have not been adequately trained, US involvement is turning extremely expensive and the Bush Administration has no clear strategy to win peace in that country.

Kerry has come out with his own plan to deal with Iraq. First of all, he would involve important American allies and make the coalition more robust. Secondly, he would spend more on reconstruction. Third, he would more quickly train the Iraqis to take care of their country. Fourth, he would hold elections, as promised, in Iraq in 2005.

President Bush counters Kerry's arguments with vehemence. He contends that American troops are not doing the fighting alone in Iraq, that there is an international coalition in place, that Kerry would find no new allies to join the war efforts, especially if Kerry keeps saying that the US is fighting a wrong war and calls it a "diversion".

The American people are faced with a hard choice. They know that President Bush has led the country into an expensive war. They are aware that the Bush Administration has failed to justify the reasons it gave for attacking Iraq. Nobody knows how long it would take to resolve the Iraqi quagmire. Though Kerry has forcefully argued that President Bush took a wrong decision, he knows that there is no alternative but to complete the mission that Bush has begun and he has publicly vowed to do so. But, at the same time, he has nothing new to offer to resolve the crisis except emphasizing multilateralism. But that is not going to be an easy task; Bush administration officials have been trying hard to enlarge the coalition, ever since they found the intractability of the problem and have not succeeded in convincing others, including India, Pakistan and other European countries.

Bush has been projecting himself as a strong, consistent and forceful leader and has tried to paint Kerry as a vacillating, weak and untrustworthy decision maker unfit for the job of a commander-in-chief. Kerry, on the other hand, has been highlighting the mistakes of the president in rushing to war with Iraq without a strategy for winning the peace, without the support of key US allies and without giving sufficient time to diplomacy to succeed.

What would the American people do on 2 November 2004? Who would they support? Who would be the next commander-in-chief of the United States? Will they change their leader in the midst of a shooting war in Iraq and a multidimensional offensive against the international terrorist networks, particularly Al Qaeda? Such changing of horses in midstream is not without precedent in the annals of Presidential elections. In the year 1952, the American people elected a Republican, Dwight D Eisenhower, in the midst of the War in Korea, which was not going well for the US. But that cannot be construed as a vote *per se* against the Democratic Administration that had taken the country to war. Incumbent President Harry S Truman was not eligible for a third term and Adlai Stevenson was the Democratic candidate who had to stand against war-hero Eisenhower. Moreover, the country in the early 1950s had a bipartisan foreign policy and was more or less united against the spread of communism around the world.

During the 1968 election, when the US was neck-deep in the Vietnam War, American people elected a Republican, Richard Nixon, as their President replacing a Democratic Administration that had intensified US military involvement in Vietnam. But the American people did not get a chance to vote against President Lyndon

Johnson who had ordered massive bombing of North Vietnam. Much before the election, the anti-war sentiment in the US had taken deep root and spread like wild fire. Students in the universities and several other political activist groups campaigned against the re-nomination of Johnson, who, seeing the depth of popular discontent, decided against running for the presidency.

American involvement in Vietnam had a considerable role in ending the era of a bipartisan approach to foreign policy in the United States. That division has continued till date. Significantly, when Bush Sr. went to war against Iraq in 1991, the US Congress was divided and did not vote overwhelmingly to authorize the war. The senior President Bush won the Gulf War, achieved an unprecedented approval rating in the opinion polls, tried to stir images of his strong leadership during the 1992 election, but failed to win the presidential race. Bill Clinton capitalized on the troubled economy and won the presidency.

Unlike his father, George Bush received substantial support from the Congress to go to war in Iraq twelve years later, removed the Saddam regime from power in a short period of time, achieving a very high approval rating in the opinion polls in the first flush of victory and is now hoping to win re-election by projecting himself as a strong leader. While, as in 1992, the economy is not doing so well, Kerry has refrained from making the economy the big issue. Both the contenders have willingly made national security the main election issue. It remains to be seen who wins the race.

[Dr. Chintamani Mahapatra is Associate Professor of American Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi]

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Social Welfare: The Third Rail of American Politics

By Asha Gupta

Social welfare is often called the “third rail of American politics”, the one you are not supposed to touch, even if it is to fix it as doing so could result in political suicide. This is largely so because the major beneficiaries of social security, the elderly make up a large bloc of voters and are suspicious of any moves aimed at reforming the social security system.

Social security has always been a dilemma in American politics. Though diffused through every layer of government—partly public, partly mixed, welfare practice in America has been “highly incoherent and irrational, defeating its own objectives”. Many believe that the American welfare system is fundamentally flawed since it leads to illegitimacy, dependency and socially destructive behaviour. There is a large majority of Americans who believe that welfare provisions only weaken the American “can do spirit”. Welfare is generally used in the negative sense of “being on the dole”. That is why social welfare has never been a key or decisive issue in presidential elections, despite strong feelings about it among the citizenry. In these elections also, it comes way down the list of issues, below the “war on terrorism” and the “national economy”.

Nevertheless, it plays an increasingly vital role in maintaining the health of the economy, if not the people. There is a big debate going on in the USA during the current presidential election year on whether it is desirable to bale out the economy from huge deficits by privatizing social security or not. The Republican candidate and incumbent President has proposed a plan whereby those under the age of 50 would be allowed to maintain their own private social security accounts, while older people would continue to be protected by the government run security system as before. In a Fox News /Opinion Dynamic Poll conducted from January 21-22,2004, on the basis of 900 registered voters nationwide, it was found that 67 percent people were

in favour of private investment of part of their social security contribution in order to gain better returns on their investment, 24 percent were against the move and 9 percent were in the “not sure” category.

Those who were in favour of privatization or public ownership of social security investments believed that by investing a part of their social security into personal retirement accounts, Americans would get more security, choice and better returns. The opponents to the plan, on the other hand, say that it would make Americans more vulnerable to if they were to invest what should be going into providing them with a safety net, into inherently unstable stock markets. The Bush administration also gave hope to millions of American working women by giving them ownership rights over their social security amount through a personal account system. This scheme would allow women to take time off to look after their ailing or dependent family members. But feminists view it as another clever and conservative device to undermine equal rights and equal pay for women. Women, on the whole ended up getting much less than men, since they entered the workforce much later and also took time off for personal and family reasons. Under the new dispensation, this would result in a much smaller handout for them. Essentially, the Republican Party wants to push back the responsibility of providing help to the needy and vulnerable sections of society on women, church and philanthropy. With the rise in the number of people seeking such support and the reluctance on the part of the taxpayers to share the burden, social security is already in crisis in the United States.

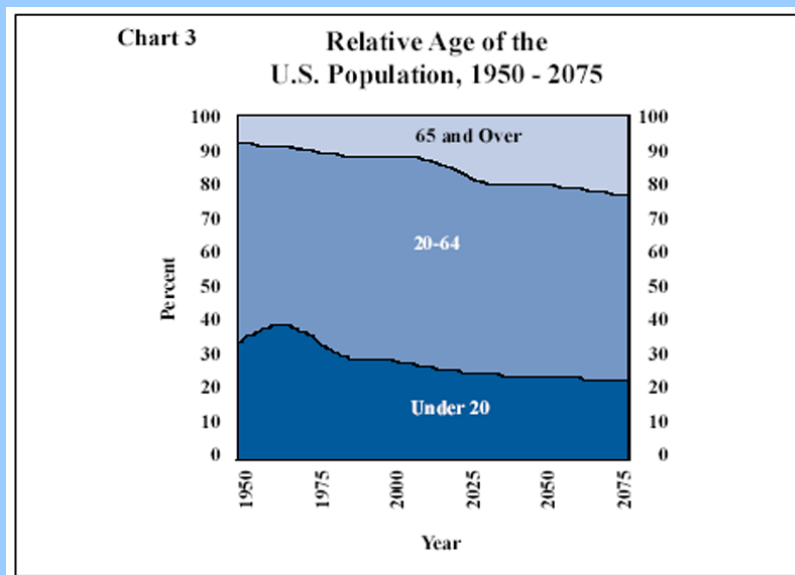
Although the Republican Party has always considered welfare as one of the biggest problems faced by the United States, the Democratic Party has adopted the policy of trying to ward off the challenges by emphasizing on “workfare”, “wedfare” and “learnfare” in lieu of “welfare”. In fact, the reform in welfare had already entered a new phase in the United States with the enactment of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) on August 23, 1996. This shift in paradigm cannot be explained merely in terms of “overload” or “fiscal crises” but it has to be explained in terms of behavioral changes in terms of distrust in social policies as public good. Both the Republican and Democrat candidates know that it would not be possible to meet all the needs and expectations of the baby boom generation in the next decade. The country has no choice but to either raise payroll taxes or resort to radical cuts in social security. Both the options are not feasible politically. No wonder, then, that both the parties are trying to shift the burden onto the household.

Perhaps this can be best explained on the basis of an example from the health sector. Most American families (about 45 million) have become completely vulnerable to health risks as they are neither fully covered by the public health system nor by private insurance (only about 17.5 million households have personal insurance). The new Bush reforms are supposed to be pro-rich as they only talk about tax rebates to those wealthy American families that can afford private health insurance. For the average American family, it remains out of reach. While Bush has proposed that the all Americans should buy insurance to cover “catastrophic illness” and set aside tax free money to cover routine medical expenses, Kerry has hinted at higher taxes for social security benefits. Though political advertisements emanating from the Republican camp say that the Kerry’s tax raise would have to be to the tune of US \$900 billion, Kerry supporters deny it. They maintain that a large majority of social security recipients would not be affected. Whether they will be taken at their word will be known only in November.

[Dr. Asha Gupta is former Principal, Bharti College, New Delhi and a scholar on American Studies]

Facts on Social Security

- ❖ A recent Report of the Social Security Administration defined social security as “a social insurance program to which nearly all workers, along with their employers, are required to contribute in order to provide protections against the risk of loss of wages due to retirement, disability or death of a worker”
- ❖ Social Security, first introduced in 1935, is funded through a Social Security payroll tax. This tax is set at 12.5 percent, of which half is contributed by the employer and half is deducted directly from the employees paycheck. There is also a maximum cutoff on the taxable income, indexed to inflation. Presently, the tax is on the first \$87,000. The Social Security payroll tax is the largest tax paid by the average American working family, even more than income tax.
- ❖ According to the US Social Security Administration, in 2004, more than 47 million Americans will receive approximately \$492 billion in social security benefits. That is, an average of \$ 10,000 per beneficiary. Social Security is the largest U.S. government program, accounting for 23 percent of federal spending.
- ❖ Contrary to general belief, it is very much a **pay as you go** system with the contributions from today’s working population being straightaway given out to retirees. The increasing number of retirees as well as a lengthened lifespan is putting strains on the system. At present, there are 3.3 working people for every retiree. By 2031, that proportion is expected to decline to 2.2 workers for every retiree. The number of retired Americans is expected to rise from 36 million today to 74 million in 2034, as the ‘baby boomers’ of the 1940s and 50s who are the major contributors to the system today enter the retirement phase.



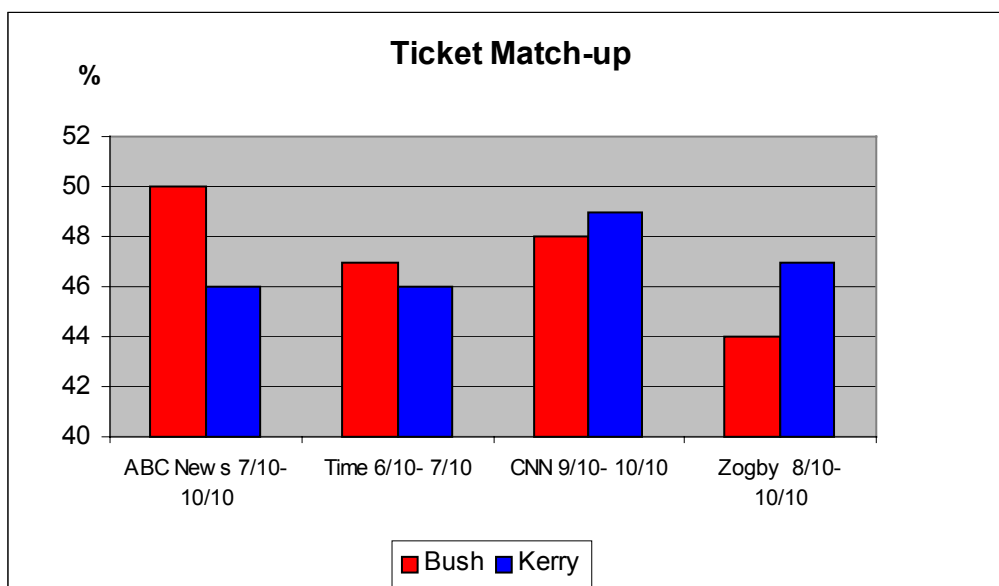
(Chart courtesy SOCIAL SECURITY: WHY ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN SOON, SSAB, 2001)

Poll Analysis: Reliability Check

As the race heats up, pollsters have been busy, polling the nation not just after major events such as the Presidential and Vice-Presidential debates that have taken place this month, but even on a daily basis. The *Washington Post* newspaper, for instance has been running a daily tracking poll since last month. With the polls themselves fluctuating wildly, indicating the volatile nature of an election that is, to use the widely quoted phrase, too close to call, campaign managers and political parties have resorted to the gambit of shooting the messenger, questioning the veracity of the polls, the methodology used in arriving at the final numbers and even the antecedents of the polling organizations themselves. Such tactics are deemed necessary to counter the effect polls might have on the still-hesitant voter who might decide to cast his vote on the basis of these polls, though according to the pollsters themselves, no scientific study has ever proved this to be the case.

This begs the question, how necessary and important are polls to the democratic process? Do the polls provide a service to the voters by taking “an objective look at the election races, an assessment of each candidate’s strengths and weaknesses, and an examination of the demographic groups supporting each candidate”, to give just some of the many reasons put forward by the pollsters for their *raison d’etre*. There are some who say that polls in fact do just the opposite, sowing confusion in the mind of the voters who are ill-equipped to decipher the poll findings and understand them in a proper perspective.

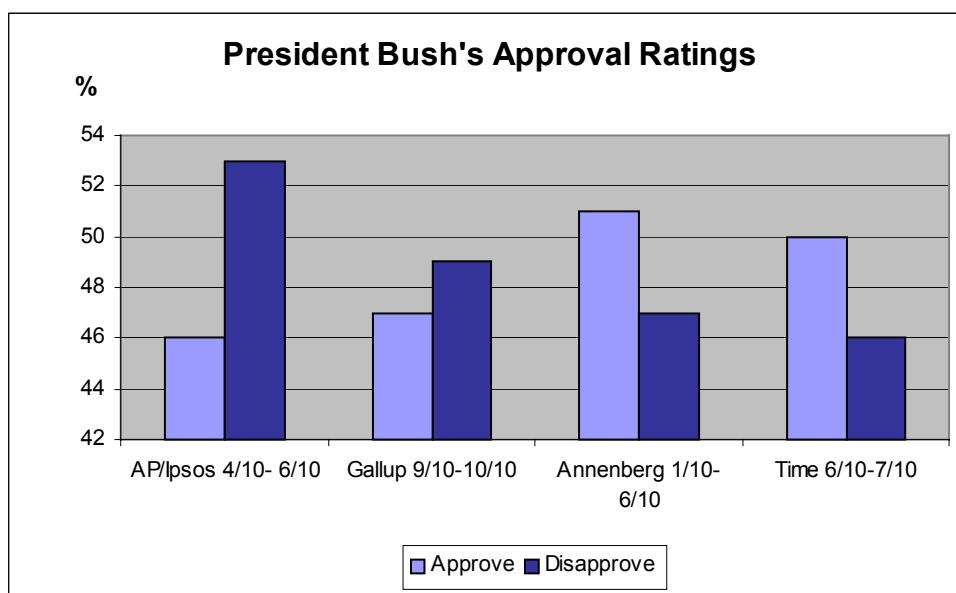
The oft-ignored fact is that opinion polls do exactly that; ask the opinion of an individual on a certain issue or personality. The questions posed in an opinion poll are open-ended and can elicit a variety of divergent answers depending on the context in which they are posed. Though pollsters respond to such criticisms by saying that they use the latest scientific methods, keeping ample margin for sampling errors and so on, differing numbers across polls, often taken on the same day, again makes for much confusion.



Pollsters don’t help their cause all that much when, in the urge to be the first, they come out with so-called ‘scientific’ polls even before the event on which the poll is based is complete. The most recent instance of this was when ABC News released

an 'instant poll' on the Second Presidential debates while they were still in progress. One would have expected that news organizations would have learnt their lessons from 2000 when they precipitated that fiasco by "calling" the elections while counting was still in progress, but that does not seem to be the case.

Coming to the latest polls, they show the gap between the two candidates narrowing again, after President Bush's creditable performance in the 2nd Presidential debates. The town hall format was very much in keeping with his campaign style and he could connect with the "town folks" and the wider audience much better. The third debate to take place on Wednesday will go back to the format of the two candidates at podiums and the President's team will no doubt make sure that he goes up much better prepared than last time, when as a commentator noted, he had been given enough material to last only forty minutes and so ended up repeating himself over and over again.



President Bush's approval ratings have also fluctuated wildly through a week again dominated by events in Iraq. A CIA report released early in the week said there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This was followed by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld's statement on Monday that he had seen no firm evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and then a statement by former Iraqi Viceroy Paul Bremer, that the United States had not put enough troops into Iraq to secure the country. These exposed the contradictions in the Administrations policies and pronouncements on Iraq, and to some extent might explain the figures above.

Tailpiece: According to the *Washington Post* newspaper, The Gallup Poll (www.gallup.com) has launched a free daily Web newscast, an eight minute video featuring pollster-in-chief Frank Newport as a stand-up anchor talking about the firm's latest polling data and what it reveals about current events. On a random day last week, the webcast featured such topics as the "gender gap" in presidential politics, how teens view the Iraq war, public ratings for the vice presidential candidates and workaholism.

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Readers Comments: ORF would like to thank the recipients of the US Election Monitor for the number of encouraging responses that they have sent to the past seventeen issues. We value our readers and their opinions and we invite them to write in on issues and arguments, carried in the Monitor, or simply send us their comments.

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