

America's Presidential Campaign

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For

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During each of my four visits to Japan this year, many Japanese have asked, “Will President Bush be re-elected?” Not having any special ability to see into the future, I cautiously answer, “Probably.” With the 2004 American presidential election less than one year away, I would like to use this column to share with you an American’s perception of the American presidential campaign, the candidates and the major issues. Assessment of major developments in United States foreign policy, particularly toward East Asia, will continue to be a primary theme of this column. But, as you know, there is a close link between foreign policy and domestic politics. Watching both hopefully will clarify aspects of US foreign policy.

Let us begin by examining some of the rules for being elected America’s president. Personal “image,” money and policies, domestic and foreign, are decisive factors for winning election. Most American voters judge the candidates as individuals. They put personal “image” above party affiliation. Intense exposure in the mass media requires that the candidates pay close attention to “image.” They must dress informally, smile and wave a lot, kiss babies and speak in clear and simple English without a foreign accent. A “British” accent is disliked, at least for presidential candidates, possibly because it reminds Americans that their nation once was a British colony.

Americans believe that their presidents should be “commoners,” not “aristocrats.” Candidates must avoid sounding or acting too intellectual. In the 2000 presidential election, Bush won many votes because he projected himself as an “average American.” His Democratic opponent Albert Gore lost many votes because he sounded highly educated. Actually, both men are from wealthy, politically successful families and attended so-called “Ivy League” colleges (Yale for Bush and Harvard for Gore.)

Americans expect their presidents to be of high moral character. Morality is defined in Christian terms. Americans want their president to “pray to God” and “thank God,” but maintain a strict separation between organized religion and the national government. All presidents have been Christians, but only because the majority of American voters are Christian. Likewise, all presidents have been men. Women have tried, but at least this time around, no woman is considered to be a strong candidate because Hilary Clinton has declined to run, at least until the next presidential election.

A presidential candidate must convince voters that they will put loyalty to America and honesty to the public ahead of personal greed and will not give excessive favors to family and friends. Service in the US armed forces gives a candidate a slight advantage over those without military service. Individual misconduct, although forgiveness is a cornerstone of their Christian religious faith, is not easily forgiven. Dishonesty during the 1970s “Watergate” scandal compelled President Nixon to resign. Sexual misconduct and undercut public support for President Clinton’s Administration and the Democratic Party.

President George W. Bush now is clearly the strongest candidate. His rating in the public opinion polls is mixed, but he has several advantages over his Democratic opponents. He has the kind of “image” that many Americans like. He smiles and waves

a lot, dresses like an “average” American, and often talks like a Texas “cowboy.” His staff has successfully projected him to the American public as a patriotic Christian. He likes to go to church and to dress in military uniforms. American flags always decorate the stage when he speaks and frequently asks God for help and thanks him for making America great.

But Bush has much more than “image” helping him. He has a lot of rich friends and supporters who have contributed record amounts of money to support his campaign. Also, his Democratic opponents are helping him by attacking one another and dividing the ranks of the Democratic Party.

President Bush’s main weaknesses are on the policy side. His economic policies and tax cuts appear to have ignited a strong economic recovery in the United States. Sustained economic growth will greatly boost prospects for his election. But the situation in Iraq remains the most formidable obstacle to his re-election. Also, continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula and lingering possibility for war also are a potential impediment to re-election. In short, foreign policy and developments in the Middle East and Northeast Asia could prove to be the decisive factors in the 2004 American presidential election.