

Australians paying keen attention to US election

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sydney // For months, the exhausting race to the White House has dominated the Australian media. Talk radio programmes have been abuzz with claims Barack Obama had links to terrorists and resurrected stories that John McCain's wife stole drugs to fuel an addiction to painkillers, while the newspapers have pored over the unflappability of the Democratic candidate and his opponent's apparent need for a miracle to win the presidency.

"I think Australians do care about the result," said Pip Hinman, an Australian social justice advocate. "Just as the whole Obama campaign has tapped into America's desire for change, some of that has had an effect in Australia as well. But while Obama's promising change, change, change – it may be more spin than substance.

"We've been bombarded with this election here in Australia," Ms Hinman said. "We have never before been so aware of a US election campaign because it's having those ripple effects."

If Australians could vote in the US presidential election, the Democrat, Mr Obama, would win handsomely, according to a global poll conducted by the Gallup Organisation. In the survey of 70 countries, Gallup reported that two-thirds of Australians favoured Mr Obama and about 15 per cent would vote for Mr McCain if they could.

"This is a bloke of elegance and calm consideration," said Kim Beazley, a former Australian deputy prime minister.

"If somebody has to have a nuclear trigger in his hand, he's not a bad bloke to hold it."

One year ago, voters in Australia ushered in a new era of social democratic politics when the Labor leader, Kevin Rudd, swept to victory in national elections and there is an expectation that US voters will do the same on Nov 4.

"It's great to think that such an arrogant country like America could have its first black president," said Jed Hawkins, 25, a graphic designer from Sydney. Obama "would do an awesome job repairing some of the damage [George W] Bush has left behind."

Other Australians are not convinced the Illinois senator has the mettle to lead the world's most powerful country.

"I have great hesitation over Obama and his lack of experience, given how the world is at the moment and how dangerous it is," said Hillary Edmont, a retired schoolteacher. "He's a great unknown, but John McCain would be a safe, sensible option."

Because the collective might of the United States' economy, military and culture dictate much of what happens around the world, Geoffrey Garrett, the head of the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, said he believes this presidential election matters more than most others in recent memory.

"The stakes are higher here not only in the US but globally simply because the American reaction to September 11 has made the 2000s a pretty antagonistic decade and I think the world is watching now to see if the US can come back into the global mainstream more.

"I think the Australia-US relationship would be absolutely rock solid under McCain or Obama. I would imagine that Kevin Rudd would be looking forward very much to working with somebody like Barack Obama, who's an avowed multilateralist who takes climate change more seriously than George Bush certainly and probably more than John McCain," Mr Garrett said.

Formal defence ties between Australia and the United States were forged in the early 1950s. It is an enduring alliance that saw Australian troops serve in the Vietnam War, as well as more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, but Canberra needs the relationship – and the guarantees of military assistance that go with it – far more than Washington does.

Australia's commitment to conflicts in the Middle East is what analysts describe as "alliance maintenance" – a diplomatic necessity to ensure the security umbrella the United States provides remains intact.

It could see the next US administration asking Australia for additional help in Afghanistan.

"I would imagine that the next US president is going to come calling on prime minister Rudd asking for more Australian involvement in Afghanistan in 2009 or 2010," Mr Garrett said.

Although many Australians are generally disappointed with the Bush presidency, Mr Beazley said public opinion has not turned against the US alliance.

"I don't think you can properly classify it as anti-Americanism here," he said.

"Even though there are high levels of disapproval of the Iraq war and unfortunately also at the moment our engagement in Afghanistan, there's been only glacial movement in the underpinning support of the United States alliance. That is not necessarily the case elsewhere around the world."

As the presidential campaign enters its final phase, pundits are gazing thoughtfully into near future to try to predict the result of what Mr Beazley describes as the "most captivating US election since the Kennedy-Nixon race in 1960".

"I think Obama will get there," he said confidently. "I personally think but for this economic meltdown he probably would not have fallen across the line. Now it looks as though he likely will."



Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, waits backstage at an event in Lake Worth, Florida, last week. Jae C Hong / AP