

In-Depth

An idiot's guide to the ... UNITED STATES PRES

The United States election dominates local media, but what does it mean for Australians? **Sam Bolitho** spoke to Professor Geoffrey Garrett, from the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre, and Professor Joseph Siracusa, from RMIT University, to find out.

Sam Bolitho: What are the implications for Australia?

Geoffrey Garrett: The bottom line theme of this election is constraint. The United States will be focused on digging itself out of the financial crisis and the war on terrorism will be bigger, not smaller, on the agenda. Iraq and Afghanistan will still be there, but Pakistan and Iran will also be on the agenda. All that means Australia will be expected to play an expanded role in Afghanistan.

Joseph Siracusa: Yes, I agree. I think Australia will take an increased role regardless of who becomes president.

SB: And what about climate change?

GG: If Australia is looking for new global leadership, they are likely to be disappointed. The US won't take a leadership role and that extends to other issues in the Asia-Pacific community.

JS: I think climate change is on the backburner right now. People aren't going to worry about climate change if they're more worried about how they're going to pay their mortgage.

SB: Is Prime Minister Kevin Rudd more closely aligned to Barack Obama or John McCain?

GG: The differences between the two are ultimately more about style than substance. On style terms, you might think Rudd is more like Obama. He's a 21st century politician and centre-left. But I'm not sure it would make so much difference in policy terms. In the things that matter to Australia, their (the two presidential hopefuls) policies are quite similar.

JS: Barack Obama is more chemistry attuned to Kevin Rudd than John McCain. Obama would probably take a more multilateral approach to Asian problems. McCain has a different mind set - he is Cold War Era.

Obama is not and Rudd is not. There'll be a little less trouble in Kevin Rudd's life if Obama gets up.

SB: Can comparisons be made to the presidential race and last year's Australian election?

GG: Certainly. The US election is getting close to a "time for change" style election and that's my read of what happened in Australia last year. Australians voted at a time when everything seemed to be doing very well, particularly the economy.

But obviously things in the US are quite different; the perilous state of the US economy is clearly the No.1 driver of the election and that benefits Obama considerably.

JS: Perhaps the last (Australian) election is a bellwether for what's going to happen in the United States. This time it'll be an anti-republican campaign.

By all accounts, Barack should win, but there are still a lot of doubts in the American political mind about whether he's suitable for the White House.

SB: Why should Australians care about the result of the US election?

GG: The US might not be as powerful as it once was, or as George Bush thought it was, but it's still the most powerful country in the world.

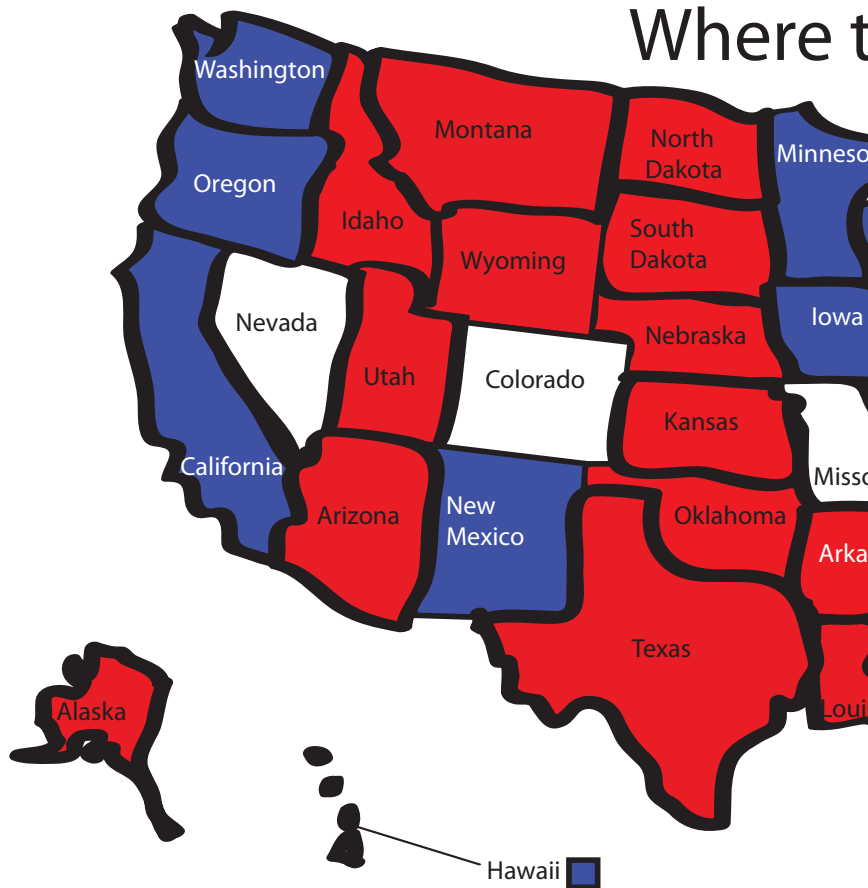
And obviously, in economic, political, security and cultural terms, ties between Australia and the US are extremely strong.

JS: Well, for the same reasons Americans had to care about what happened in Britain in the 19th century.

America's actions and its policies impact on Australians throughout the world, whether it's economic, social or political.

Australia needs to be attuned to the developments in the world. This alliance has been going for over 50 years and while it does provide Australia with a large degree of protection, it also allows Australia to use its influence to encourage restraint.

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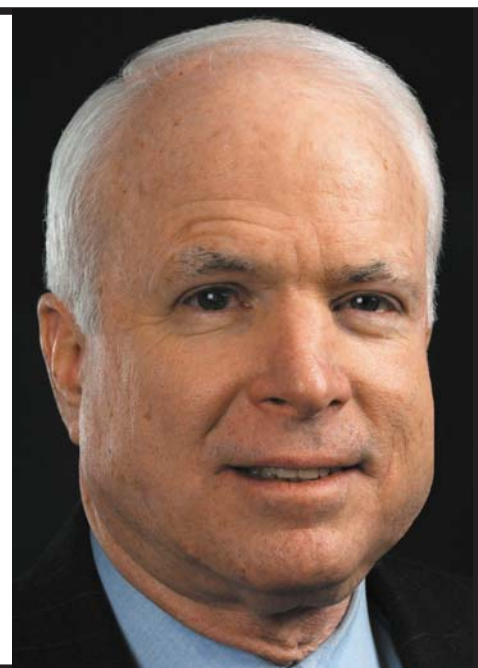
John McCain

"Country first, reform, peace, prosperity."

Background

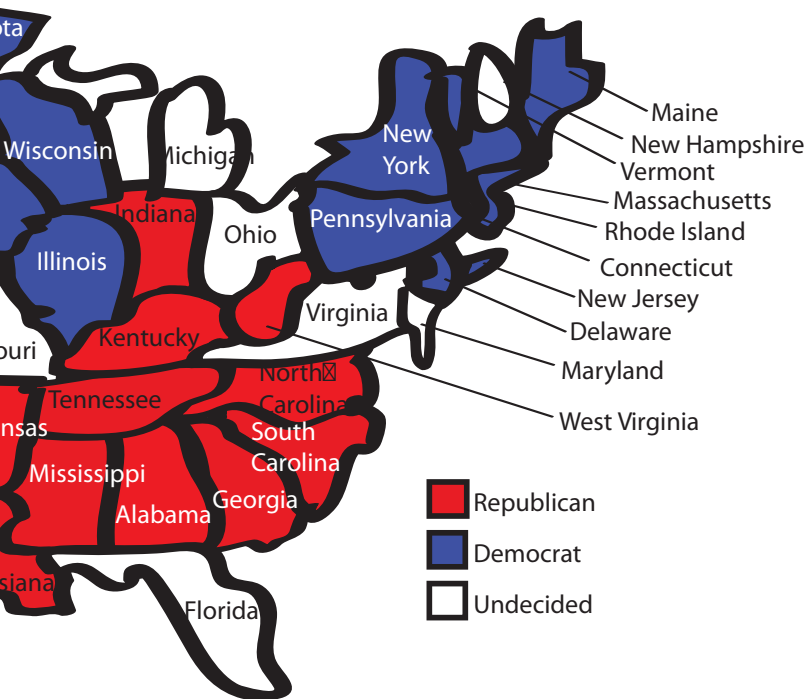
If elected, John McCain, 72, would become the oldest president of the United States. He has been serving in the Senate for 22 years and is currently a senator for Arizona. He has served in the Senate since 1986, and has a reputation for reforming election financing and lobbying laws. McCain served in Vietnam where he was held prisoner for five years. McCain was also a presidential candidate in 2000 but lost the nomination to George W Bush.

Running mate: Sarah Palin
Strengths: Experience
Weakness: Age



SIDEDENTIAL ELECTION

the votes lean...



Finding talk of bellwether states, air wars, Medicaid, donkeys and elephants all a bit overwhelming? You're not alone. **Stephanie Ryan** casts aside some worn American clichés to demystify the more important particulars of November's coming elections.

The parties

The Republican Party has traditionally been the domain of conservatives. Akin to the Liberal Party in Australia, the Republican Party currently holds the executive office. It favours a free market, policies supporting business, economic liberalism and fiscal conservatism, with a higher spending on military.

Geographically, the Republican vote is strongest in the southern and western states.

Famous Republicans include Abraham Lincoln and incumbent President George W Bush.

The Democrat Party is the oldest political party in the United States. Similar to the Labor Party here in Australia, its supporter base is historically made up of farmers, labourers, academia, unions and religious and ethnic minorities. The values of the Democrat Party lie in social liberalism, with a policy emphasis on a free enterprise system measured by government intervention. The Democrats hold an outright majority in the House of Representatives and 49 seats in the 100-seat Senate. Famous Democrats include the party's founder, Thomas Jefferson, and Bill Clinton.

The election process

If more than one individual declares their candidacy for office, nominees must first gain the backing of delegates in state-level elections known as the primaries. Beginning in January of an election year and ending in June, every state gives its members an opportunity to vote on the nominees. The results of these ballots determine how many delegates will represent each candidate at the national convention. Once a candidate has secured enough delegates to win the ticket, they must choose a running mate to become the candidate for vice-president. Presidential nominees are generally encouraged to pick

a running mate who balances the ticket or compensates for his or her weaknesses.

When the general election takes place in November, senators and representatives are elected by the most votes, not by a majority. Voting, however, is not compulsory for US citizens. Once the vote has been taken, the sum of a state's representatives and senators is used to allocate the number of votes a state may cast for a presidential nominee.

The system

Like Australia, the United States is divided into three tiers of government: local, state and federal.

At a national level, government is based on the doctrine of the separation of powers. The doctrine, which is enshrined in the Constitution, divides the power to govern between three autonomous groups: the legislative (Congress), the executive (President and Cabinet) and the judicial (the courts). Each group, theoretically, checks the power of the other two to ensure one person or one group of people does not have too much influence.

Congress

Congress is divided into two houses—the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each of the 435 members of the House of Representatives serves a two-year term. The House of Representatives operates on the basis of proportional representation. Presently seven states have only one representative, while California has 52. Citizens must be at least 25 years old before they can be elected to the House.

The 100 members of the Senate serve staggered six-year terms. Each state is allowed two representatives in the Senate to allow for equal representation. The Constitution requires that US senators are at least 30 years old before they are elected.



Barack Obama

"I'm asking you to believe not just in my ability to bring real change in Washington...I'm asking you to believe in yours."

Background

If elected Barack Obama would be the first African-American president of the United States. Obama is a first-term senator, having been elected in 2004. Before entering federal politics, he spent eight years as a senator in Illinois. Obama's first act as a senator was to introduce a bipartisan law allowing Americans to learn online how their tax dollars are spent. He also serves on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, which helps oversee the care of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Running mate: Joe Biden
Strengths: Ability to reform
Weakness: Inexperience