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Local hopes riding on Barack Obama

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ANTI-AMERICANISM can flare up in Australia if the McCain-Palin ticket prevails in today's US election, a leading expert on anti-Americanism warns.

Brendan O'Connor, a visiting fellow at Washington's Woodrow Wilson Centre, was commenting after the announcement he will join three other eminent academics at the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre.

O'Connor, an associate professor, says Australia's two main political parties — especially Labor — have “kept a lid” on anti-Americanism and not exploited it for electoral purposes the way former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder attempted to do in his last campaign.

Against the backdrop of a BBC poll showing 62 per cent of Australians are optimistic an Obama presidency will lead to improved ties with the US, O'Connor says there “would be a degree of disappointment: Australians would be dumbfounded [if Barack Obama did not win]”.

But if he does win, as opinion polls have been suggesting, the

Rudd Government will have its work cut out in trying to replicate the “amazing level of access” former PM John Howard enjoyed with President George W. Bush.

Equally, a McCain-Palin victory will pose “alliance management” challenges for Kevin Rudd, given how Bush and Sarah Palin fit centuries-old stereotypes of Americans being populist, anti-intellectual and culturally unsophisticated, he says.

O'Connor says his most striking insight from working in Washington, DC, is about how US policymaking is so “multi-headed, with a variety of branches of power . . . you get a sense of this being an enormous machine. This bureaucracy tries to make decisions but is far less coherent than we get a sense of from outside the US; all these branches are not moving in the same direction or singing off the same page.”

Joining O'Connor at the US Studies Centre as holder of the chair in politics will be political scientist Margaret Levi, former president of the American Political Science Association and Bacharach professor of international studies at the University of Washington in Seattle.