

# Voting *for* democracy

How do you best 'do' democracy? Is America still leading the way? And why do those people in countries upholding democracy, not choose to exercise their rights more often through the vote? Is it back to basics for political campaigning? **Maggie Scammell** and **Zuhra Bahman** offer their perspectives.

For a purported role model of democracy, the USA has some dubious qualifications. Voter turnout at both presidential and parliamentary elections is notoriously low. The exceptional turnout in November at about 60 per cent was the highest since 1968, after decades of falling polls. The average throughout the 1990s was less than 50 per cent, lower than all European countries, while in an international ranking of all countries which held at least two democratic elections in the period 1945-98, the US came 114th out of 140. US campaigns are also infamously expensive. The 2004 presidential and congressional races will cost a record \$3.9 billion, according to estimates by the Center for Responsive Politics. That is a 30 per cent increase from 2000. The presidential campaigns alone spent at least \$1.2 billion, much of that on advertising in the battleground states. Despite repeated attempts, campaign costs keep spiralling.

More than this, international comparative surveys of citizen confidence in democratic governments show that the longest and clearest decline has been in the US.

While the reasons for the democratic deficit are much disputed and multi-causal, one persistent contributory candidate is the rise and grip of negative campaigning. Attack advertising became the hallmark of US campaigning in the late 1980s, driven by George H Bush's reversal of Michael Dukakis's opinion poll lead. A brilliant and uncompromisingly aggressive strategy, master-minded by Bush's legendary consultant Lee Atwater, went down in campaign folklore as the new way to win. Since then, and despite academic claims that attack adverts 'shrink the electorate', they have become a defining feature of campaigning American style. Professor Lynda Lee Kaid's comparison of political adverts among 13 democracies over three elections – including the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Russia and South Korea – shows that campaigns in the US, and only the US, are dominated by negativity. The comparison also demonstrates that the US was the only country whose campaign adverts paid no attention at all to foreign affairs. Even in the 2004 race, supposedly a referendum on Bush's Iraq policy, moral values appeared to be the single most important issue, as indeed it had been in 1996 and 2000. By international standards, US campaigning is outstandingly nasty and inward looking.

So who would want to copy America? The answer is, much of the rest of the world. It may be a paradox, but it is not a mystery. The US, with more than 500,000 elected offices, has more democratic races than anywhere else. It is the living laboratory of electioneering techniques and technology, the undeniable trendsetter for political campaigning around the world. It has pioneered virtually every campaign innovation of the last 50 years: television advertising, televised debates, direct marketing, large scale polling and small scale qualitative testing of voters' attitudes, business marketing methods of voter segmentation, internet campaigning, web logs, and show business staging of political rallies. Many of these have become definitive features of modern campaigns throughout the democratic world, and they were all born in the USA. It is no surprise that politicians and campaign managers everywhere look to America.

US influence on electioneering worldwide is considerable. It is both direct and indirect. A global survey of nearly 600 consultants revealed impressive co-operative networks with US expertise, most heavily in Latin America and South Africa, but also East and West Europe.

In fact, sometimes US campaign teams find themselves in opposite camps in far away lands. Former Bill Clinton advisers James Carville and Stanley Greenberg advised Barak in Israel's 1999 campaign, while Republican consultant Arthur Finkelstein worked for Netanyahu; in Mexico's 2000 presidential campaign, Carville, advising Labastida, found himself confronting another Clinton consultant, Dick Morris, who was advising Vicente Fox.

Despite extensive evidence of direct US involvement, consultants worldwide typically prefer the shopping model explanation of US influence; the US offers a dazzling bazaar from which campaigners round the world make selective choices. Much is bought, but equally much rejected. Witness, for example, the UK's continued rejection of paid political advertising, despite simultaneously buying into US communicative styles – attack adverts for the Conservatives, and Clintonesque non-political language for New Labour.

The Bush-Kerry contest's most highly publicised feature has been its negativity, conducted most





‘The more telling innovation may be a trend back to grass roots campaigning, retail politics as it is known’

viciously by proxy in advertising campaigns waged by semi-detached groups – the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, with their attack on Kerry's Vietnam war record, the outstanding example. This took over the media agenda.

However, the more telling innovation may be a trend back to grass roots campaigning, retail politics as it is known. Both the Republicans and Democrats invested heavily in massive consumer marketing databases to develop voter profiles for micro-targeting. In the Bush camp, especially, this retail politics was less traditional canvass and more multi-level marketing in the style of Amway, the world's most successful pyramid seller. Party recruiters, equipped with communication aid ‘toolboxes’ and offered incentives of prizes, were tasked to set up the pyramid of volunteers, whose contact with voters feeds off and into the central database, to enable ever more precise polling and direct mailing.

In the intense world of campaigns, it is often difficult to isolate with precision those techniques and tactics that turn elections. Winning methods are most often determined by elite consensus, and post hoc rationalisation of effectiveness.

While we await the full, considered verdicts that will roll out over the course of following years, it is always risky to predict. However, it may well be that the main lesson this time is back to the future – the country which gave us the mass marketed television campaign becomes the proving ground for the effectiveness of personal influence once offered automatically by mass member parties. ■



### Dr Margaret Scammell

(PhD 1991) is a senior lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications and author of *Media, Journalism and Democracy* (Ashgate, 2000). She was previously a research fellow at Joan Shorestein Center for Press/Politics, at the John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.



# Voting *for* the first time

**Zuhra Bahman**, a second year student of Anthropology and Law, headed home to register to vote in Afghanistan's elections this year.



Last April I joined a queue of burqa clad Afghan women in a UNHCR tent in Afghanistan to get my elector's card. This gave me the right to vote in the first presidential election in my country. There was an overwhelming air of pride and excitement in the room as the people of Afghanistan were for the first time taking part in a democratic practice. Long after I got my card I stayed and observed all kinds of women who were there to register: schoolgirls in all black uniforms, doctors and nurses, housewives, widows and disabled people. Most were illiterate and some were reluctant to have their photographs taken.

The long awaited elections came three years after the US-backed coalition forces overthrew the infamous Taliban. Poverty, illiteracy and human rights violations are still common – the government has not had the chance and resources to tackle these problems to a considerable extent. But the country has gone through a lot of changes in those three years. Now Kabul is a lively city. With the midnight curfew lifted, streets are full of restaurant goers until late in the night, and music is heard all over. Universities and schools are full of young women. There is a huge international presence in Kabul in the form of charity organisations, businesses and security forces all contributing to the shaping of the city.

Amid all these problems and changes, Afghanistan experienced its first presidential election in October. Fifteen candidates challenged the interim president, Hamid Karzai, who finally won the election and remains president. There was huge criticism of the elections. The Bush administration, the UN and the international community were accused of rushing the election when the country was not ready. The election process itself was described as chaos. The ink used to mark the fingers of the electors, for instance, was found to be easy to clean off, giving many Afghans the opportunity to vote more than once.

Despite the problems during this election, as an Afghan, I believe that it is a very timely and positive step for Afghanistan. Afghans have spent most of their lives being oppressed by their rulers. They have been forced into exile, imprisoned, tortured, sold and ignored. This election gave them a chance to express themselves, to participate in democracy – no matter how flawed a democracy it is. Afghanistan is recovering from decades of war, therefore it is wrong to expect the election process in Afghanistan to meet high standards. This time Afghans have just voted, perhaps in a flawed election, but to help ensure that in future elections they are more aware, confident and ready to fight for their rights.

**This article first appeared in *The Beaver*, LSE's student newspaper, 19 October 2004. ■**

*'There was an overwhelming air of pride and excitement in the room as the people of Afghanistan were for the first time taking part in a democratic practice'*

## Spaces of democracy



This year the contributors to a new book *Spaces of Democracy*: geographical perspectives on citizenship, participation and representation (Sage, 2004) elaborated on the importance of geographical questions to understand contemporary democracy.

Murray Low, lecturer in human geography in the Department of Geography and Environment at LSE, co-edited the book with Clive Barnett, Open University.

Dr Low said: 'The authors explored a series of cases where geography causes problems for many straightforward ideas about what democracy might be and how it might work.'

'With increasing flows of migrants across national boundaries, deciding who can and who cannot be a citizen for democratic purposes, is an increasingly difficult matter.'

'The media, apparently the key means of political communication in spatially extensive democracies, is routinely blamed for the deterioration of participation and debate. Yet it may be that our understanding of the public is as much at fault. To say democracy is rule by the people is to say everything and, at the same time, nothing.'

'Whatever democracy is, it has to take place within a world made complex by geography: a world of many, nested and sometimes overlapping geopolitical spaces, where the people are spread out and divided not only by physical space and boundaries but by history, culture and material needs.'

● The LSE Public Policy Group, based in the Department of Government, has worked on the design and operation of new electoral systems in Britain. Professor Patrick Dunleavy at LSE and Professor Helen Margetts of the University of Oxford advised the Lord Jenkins Commission on the voting system called AV Plus. Along with Professor Simon Hix, the pair also produced an influential report on the operations of the new European Parliament election system, and designed the Supplementary Vote system for electing the London mayor and assembly, used successfully in May 2000. See [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/lsepublicpolicy](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/lsepublicpolicy)

● To read more on globalisation and democracy, see [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/globaldimensionslibrary](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/globaldimensionslibrary) or [www.opendemocracy.com](http://www.opendemocracy.com)