

**Interview with Simon Hix, Professor of European and Comparative Politics
Government Department, LSE
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00:00

Justin Gest:

Hi I'm Justin Gest, a doctoral student here in the Department of Government at the LSE. Thanks for tuning in to this month's edition of the Hot Seat

Today with us is professor of European and Comparative politics, Simon Hix. We'll be focussing on the comparative side of his speciality and we'll be discussing the American election and the primaries ongoing across the pond.

Professor Hix, let's start off with the first question. Many people in Europe are still learning who John McCain is. He stopped by 10 Downing Street just last week actually to meet with Gordon Brown, but he no doubt remains in the shadows of Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton abroad. What about John McCain and his ideas should Britain and Europe really know about and be most interested in hearing?

00:43

Simon Hix:

Well, McCain is an interesting character from a European point of view, in that he's not really a traditional mainstream republican. He's a bit of a maverick inside his own party; he's got very strong views; he is quite moderate on some issues and I think some of the international media portrays him as a relatively moderate character, by American Republican standards.

He sponsored several bi-partisan bills in Congress for campaign finance reform; he was in favour of a quite moderate position on immigration and sided with some of the Democrats on immigration issues. He's also got a relatively moderate position on gun control. But on some of the social questions, like abortion for example, he's quite socially conservative, he is quite traditional, he's been moving in a more socially conservative direction as part of his presidential election campaign. So the last time he stood in the primaries, in the Republican primaries five years ago, he was fighting it as the sort of liberal wing of the Republican Party. This time he's fighting it as a much more mainstream socially conservative candidate to try and capture the religious right within the Republican Party. So there's a little bit of uncertainty about what he really represents and where he will position himself come the election in November and the campaign in November.

01:59

JG:

Well as you mentioned, John McCain has never been a big fan of George W. Bush, in fact at one point their relationship was so sour that he even considered switching parties. However, McCain remains a strong supporter of the Bush administration's

war in Iraq. Will this define McCain's image to the world and will his campaign hinge on the progress of the war in Iraq?

02:20

SH:

He's in a very difficult situation, because his position on Iraq is not identical to the Bush administration's position. He is in fact is very critical of the way they have managed the war in Iraq. He's in favour of the war in Iraq in the sense that he's a hawk when it comes to security issues; he believes that it was right to have military intervention, but he thinks that not enough troops were sent. He was very critical of Cheney and critical of Rumsfeld and the way the war was managed. He believed from the start that they should have sent in much more force, really demonstrated the power of American might. This would have been a strong signal to the world – if you're going to do it, do it properly, is his view. This is why he was in favour when they talked about the surge in troops, sending more troops. He was in favour of sending even more troops. He was saying, if you're going to do a job, do it properly, otherwise it's not worth doing it at all.

It's a high risk strategy for him, but it's hard to know, it's hard to read the signs and who knows where Iraq is going to be come November? I mean, we're starting to see some signs that some elements of the surge seem to be working, Iraq is starting to calm down, the economy is gradually starting to be rebuilt, people's lives are gradually starting to be rebuilt, the security situation is gradually getting better. Now if that continues on that trajectory by November, he can say that we was right, he can say that he has been right, that you cannot categorically say it was wrong to send in the troops into Iraq, to undertake the Iraq war, it's just too early to tell. And in the long term, if the long term is a stable Iraq, a democratic Iraq, he can say "I was right all along". Right now we might say the war was wrong and the overwhelming public opinion in Europe is that the Europeans view this as a terrible campaign by the US, that it was a mistake to fight the Iraq war, but we don't know in six months or a year or several years' time whether or not in hindsight we'll still be able to say that and that's what McCain is banking on.

04:13

JG:

Now I know you're a big fan of statistics; in a recent Gallup poll of American voters there are indications that one product of the tough primary election between Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton may be that supporters of the loser may bitterly defect to McCain.

What is the best resolution of this primary that the Democratic Party can reasonably hope for?

04:33

SH:

The best resolution for the Democratic Party at the primary is that they get it over quickly. Even if it runs til the end of the primary season, even if it runs all the way to the Democratic convention, even if it runs all that way they can then say it's done, we've pick somebody and we'll then go and fight the campaign together.

I just don't believe voters who are now telling pollsters.. The latest data is coming out where you've got Clinton supporters saying "I'm not going to vote for Obama, I will either abstain or vote McCain", there's a certain percentage of Obama supporters saying that... I just don't believe that, that's cheap talk. They're saying that to pollsters because they're threatening to try and encourage the rest of the party to support their candidate. They will be upset, they'll be bitter for a few weeks, but if Clinton comes out strongly in support of Obama after the convention, or vice versa, then I think all bets are off and we'll be back into the national election campaign, Republicans versus Democrats.

05:33

JG:

Well it may all come down to superdelegates and of course, as you probably know, superdelegates are the about 800 Democratic Party officials who will submit their votes at the party's national convention this summer.

With the primary race this close, the swing of those 800 delegates very may well determine the outcome of this election and indeed if she ends up losing the primary election race, Hilary Clinton could still salvage the nomination with extraordinary superdelegate support. Now, some might call this undemocratic, but either way, superdelegates have a choice of voting the way of their constituencies and the way of their personal judgment. My question for you is which way should they vote and, also, if legislative history (which you've studied quite a bit) is a guide in politics, which way will they vote in the end?

06:20

SH:

I think the answer's the same for those two things. I think it's going to be a big mistake for the party if the superdelegates overturn what I think the public will see as the public mandate for a candidate and we're already seeing that in the way the delegates are already committing themselves to the candidates. A few months ago it was overwhelming that the superdelegates were committing themselves for Clinton, two to one for Clinton, and the New York Times and the Associated Press do polls every week of the superdelegates. And gradually we're starting to see the pendulum swing back towards Obama. There's about 450 of the 800 and something superdelegates have already pledged support to one or other of the candidates and currently Obama and Clinton are running about even among those superdelegates. The remaining 200 or so are waiting and my guess is that Obama is going to be 100-150 delegates ahead come the convention. I don't think that there's going to be enough superdelegates to break in favour of Clinton to actually swing it for her. She's

banking on the fact that she's going to win Pennsylvania, but even if she wins Pennsylvania she's only going to make up 20 or so delegates on Obama and he's going to win it back straight away in the next week in some of the smaller primaries in North Carolina and so on. So my guess is that come the convention, he's still going to 150 ahead and the superdelegates are going to break relatively evenly for the two.

I think there's going to be a lot of pressure on them from the party, from the media, to say that even if you really think that Clinton is the better candidate, it just looks terrible for the party if they even personally believe Clinton's better, that they do go and vote for Clinton over Obama in the convention and win it for her very narrowly, because then it's playing into the hands of McCain and the Republicans and the talk show radio and the Republican media machine and all the rest of it. They can then say look, if she fights the campaign, who are you, you weren't even elected by your voters to come and fight against us, Obama's the real candidate for you, why should we accept you as legitimate. It leads to a whole range of very, very difficult questions for her. I think that under difficult conditions, with a different candidate, with a different person, with different people around them, I think they would have already retired from the campaign and already withdrawn and already said I support the leading candidate. Obama is the leading candidate now and I really don't think Clinton is going to win back enough to win it back.

One of the interesting things that really suggests that this is the case is the betting on the electronic markets. In America you're not actually allowed to bet on election campaigns as you are in a lot of places in Europe, but what you can do is you can buy shares or buy futures in the candidate you think is going to win the nomination and which candidate you think is going to win the campaign.

There are two interesting things here. One of them is what the price of Obama and Clinton shares are for winning the nomination. So Obama's running at 75c for the dollar, so if you buy a share of Obama for 75c and he wins, you get a dollar back. For Clinton, she's running at about 25c. So people who are buying market shares in who they think is going to win the nomination are betting three to one that Obama is going to win the nomination. And previous history has shown that these electronic markets are much better predictors of outcomes than opinion polls, because it's nerdy political science professors like me who are actually trading on these shares and we're following them daily, trying to work out who's going to win.

The second interesting thing is what the prices are for November. A few weeks ago the Democrats were running way ahead, so that any candidate up against McCain was running 60-40 percentage of the Democrats likely to win against the Republicans in November. It's narrowed dramatically, it's now down to 55-45 and it's going to be neck and neck I think come November: McCain versus either Hilary or Obama.

10:08

JG:

Well you might be pioneering a new, predictive method for elections. You've studied these elections and legislative politics in many different democratic countries over the years: has another party in another country ever experienced a divide anything like the

Democrats' divide right now? And either way, will America's disillusionment with George W. Bush have an impact?

10:30

SH:

No other party in any other system that I know of has had this sort of down to the wire battle between two leading figures. This is partly because most parties don't have this sort of primary system so close to an election if you like, or such a long primary season. So if you think the presidential election campaign runs over two years, well one and a half years of that is the primary and the last four to six months is the final election campaign. People are exhausted by the last few months and the coffers are empty for campaign spending and the rest of it.

Most other systems have much shorter truncated campaigns and a much smaller part of that truncated campaign is the choice of the leader who's going to be fighting. The choice of leader is often inherited, it's the previous leader who lost, or if you lose the previous election, the decision is made there and then to choose the person who's going to run in five years' time so they can build up their portfolio and image against the voters, amongst the people they're standing against a long way in advance. The American system is almost unique in the way that it has this primary system.

You can say that this is damaging for the Democrats or damaging for the fact that voters might get exhausted by this kind of thing, but on the other hand this is actually very positive I think for American image in the world, you know American image in the world is going down because of the Bush administration, the war in Iraq, general opposition to America in not just the democratic world, but the non-democratic world, we've seen it in Europe, declining trust in America, growing opposition to America. What is happening over the last two months is quite interesting, because it's an image of America that's very different; it's an image of it being a very vibrant, very democratic society where you can talk about pretty much everything in an election campaign. The fact that we've got a woman and a black candidate fighting it out for the Democratic nomination and the likelihood that either one of these two will be either the first woman or the first black president of the United States, I think is a very positive message for the standing of America in the world.

12:36

JG:

Alright, well done, thank you very much, Professor Hix, you are off the *Hotseat*.

Professor Simon Hix, professor of European and Comparative politics here at the LSE and author of a new book *What's wrong with the European Union and how to fix it*, which just came out and is available at bookshops around the world I imagine, and certainly around Europe.

We thank you for your time and we thank you for your time listening. Please tune in next month for another edition of the *Hotseat*.

