
THE NOVEMBER 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES – WAR, ECONOMICS AND ETHICS

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With the newly elected Congress coming into office in January, it is useful to review exactly what happened last November. The success of the Democratic Party in the 2006 mid-term elections has been the subject of much speculation, debate and, often, happiness and relief. Part of the surprise and elation, however, is misplaced; the win at the congressional level continues a trend seen in the 2004 elections, when the presidential contest was close, and the Democrats had many notable wins on state and local levels. It remains to be seen if the party leadership will stick to and act on the issues that enabled last year's win (backing off of the rightward shift seen especially under Bill Clinton), and which will be necessary to win the White House in 2008. This article first looks at key election statistics and at notable national, state and local races. Next, the three key election issues will be discussed: the Iraq war; the economy (in particular issues related to the standard of living); and ethics issues concerning civil liberties and corruption. From these one can gain a rudimentary gauge by which to view legislative action during the next two years.

Congressional Election Statistics

The Democratic taking of both houses of Congress is notable in light of two factors. The first is the more than decade-long trend of congressional district remapping carried out by an incumbent Republican Party, to its own advantage; one estimate notes that only 36 House seats are actually in close contention, as opposed to 100 in 1994.¹ The second factor is the tendency of the Republican Party to have access to more campaign money. In spite of these advantages, no Republican won a Democratic-held House or Senate seat, or governorship.

All 435 seats in the House of Representatives were up for election, with the pre-election status showing the Republicans with 230, the Democrats with 201, and 1 independent (the Socialist Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who won a Senate seat in November). The election results show the Republicans now with 202 and the Democrats with 232. In terms of the total popular vote, the Democrats polled 54.1% to the Republican 44.5% (39.2 to 28.5 million votes).²

In the Senate, 33 of the 100 seats were up for election, with the old Republican dominance at 55-44 (1 independent). The Democrats pulled off some cliffhangers to emerge with a 51-49 advantage, which includes 2 independents aligned with the Democrats. The popular vote figures show the Democrats with 53.7% and Republicans with 42.6% (31.5 to 25 million votes). Crucially, Republican incumbents were defeated in six states (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Rhode Island, Missouri, Montana and Virginia, see below).

Voting in terms of population groups in many respects followed expected lines: women favoured the Democrats more than men, by 56% to about 52%.³ Whites favoured the Republicans (51-47%), and blacks the Democrats (89-10%). Latin Americans favoured the Democrats (69-30%), up from 55-45% in 2004. Asians went Democratic by 62-37%. Voters registered as independents went Democratic (57-39%), and white evangelical and born-again Christians went Republican (70-28%). In the age group 18-29, 60% voted Democratic (50% in 2004); in the 30-44 age group, 53%; in the 45-59 group, 53%; and in the 60 and over, 50%.

Voting in terms of income level showed the usual Democratic preference held by lower groups: families earning under \$15,000 per year voted Democratic by 69-31%; and those earning more than \$100,000 voted Republican (52-48%).⁴ However, within the latter group a crucial shift occurred in 2006. On the East Coast, those making \$150-200,000 voted Democratic by 63-37% (in 2004, 50% favoured Republicans), while those earning more than \$200,000 favoured the Democrats by 50-48% (in 2004, 56% favoured Republicans). This trend was seen to a lesser extent in the West, South and Midwest. Of course the question arises, why would people who had benefited so much from Republican-sponsored tax cuts abandon the party? The answer involves the issues discussed below, which seem to have produced a concern over long-term, rather than just short-term, interests.

The six Republican Senate losses are instructive.⁵ In the two southern states, Missouri and Virginia, the economic populism advocated by Democratic challengers was key. Claire McCaskill in Missouri, while pro-choice, for stem-

cell research, and opposed to anti-gay marriage measures, picked up (often conservative) rural votes to beat Senator Jim Talent by 50-47%. The Democrat James Webb in Virginia (a former Vietnam vet, secretary of the Navy and Republican) criticized the Iraq war, is pro-choice and opposed anti-gay measures, and also campaigned for the rural vote; he beat Senator George Allen by about 9,000 votes. In Pennsylvania, Senator Rick Santorum, a staunch conservative noted for his attacks on public schools and working mothers, lost to Bob Casey by 59-41%; Casey's campaign focused on economic issues and administration lies concerning the Iraq war. In Ohio, Sherrod Brown, a House member, beat Senator Mike DeWine by 56-44%, focusing on economic issues, opposition to the Patriot Act (see below), and the adverse effects of free trade agreements. In Montana, state Senate leader and organic farmer Jon Tester called for the repeal of the Patriot Act, and, in a state that had favoured Bush in 2000 and 2004 by more than 20%, beat scandal-tainted Senator Conrad Burns by about 3,000 votes. Finally, Rhode Island's liberal Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee lost to Sheldon Whitehouse by 53-47%, largely due to the former's affiliation to the party.

Democratic wins are noteworthy in other formerly Republican areas, including Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, Indiana, Michigan and Minnesota. In the six New England states (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island), of the 20 House seats, only one is now held by a Republican (Chris Shays of Connecticut).

State and Local Elections

Before the election, 28 states had Republican governors and 22 had Democrats. These figures are now switched, a Democratic gain of six positions: winning vacant seats in Colorado, Arkansas, Ohio, New York and Massachusetts, and beating the Republican incumbent in Maryland. New York's Eliot Spitzer, as the former state attorney general, was noted for taking up cases against the securities and insurance industries, and polluters.

With regard to state legislatures, almost all of which were up for election, before the election the Republicans held 21 and the Democrats 19, with 9 split (having upper and lower houses held by different parties).⁶ The post-election figures are Democrats 23, Republicans 17, and 9 split – the Democratic gains came in Oregon, Minnesota, Iowa and New Hampshire.

With regard to states where one party holds the governorship and the legislature, the Democrats now have 16 (up from 6) and the Republicans 10. In two states the change is especially historic: in New Hampshire the Democrats won such control for the first time in 130 years; in the lower house the Republicans lost 81 seats of their 92 majority; in the upper house they lost 5 of 8 seats held. In Colorado the Democrats last controlled the state in the early 1960s, and this time the winning issues included education, health care and renewable energy.

Other notable results find the election of the first Green Party mayor in a city of more than 100,000 – Richmond, California. And in Dallas County, Texas, of the 42 contested judgeships held by Republicans, Democrats won 41.

Many state and local referenda were held: voters supported stem-cell research in Missouri; and state-mandated increases in the federal minimum wage in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada and Ohio. Voters opposed same-sex marriage by big margins in Tennessee, Idaho and South Carolina, and by small margins in Wisconsin, South Dakota and Virginia; they rejected a ban on same-sex marriage in Arizona. Voters in South Dakota rejected an already legislated ban on abortion (except where the mother's life is endangered), a measure meant to serve as a test case up to the Supreme Court level in order to overturn *Roe v. Wade*; parental notification requirements were defeated in California and Oregon.

The War

The growing opposition in the US to the war in Iraq is well known. Since the end of 2004 a majority have stated that the war was a mistake,⁷ and by early 2005 the war was listed as the number one voter concern. In early 2006 one poll found 66% supportive of a reduction in troops, and by 2-1 of a timeline for their withdrawal,⁸ although poll results regarding withdrawal depended greatly on how the question was worded.⁹

Among the forces in Iraq, in March 2003, 67% of soldiers thought the invasion was worthwhile, and 50% that their unit's morale was low. Three years later, 72% thought the war should be ended within a year, and 25% were for immediate withdrawal.¹⁰

In the pre-election period only 38% viewed the invasion of Iraq positively, and 61% said that the president had no clear plan for handling the war.¹¹ Another poll found that 63%

thought that the US was losing ground, and 54% that the US should not have taken military action.¹²

Coverage of the opposition to the war has highlighted the efforts of Cindy Sheehan, whose soldier son was killed in Iraq – and who is one of many 'military families' against the war. Also covered are the three main anti-war coalitions: Not in Our Name (NION), United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), and Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER).

One should add here only a few of the other groups and individuals, including: US Labor Against the War, which successfully urged the AFL-CIO's 2005 convention to call for rapid withdrawal; the Progressive Democrats of America, behind the call by seven state Democratic parties for troop withdrawal; over 35 mainstream Christian denominations, and US Catholic bishops, who came out against pre-emptive war *before* the invasion; the Union of Reform Judaism, which called for an exit strategy and priority of the issue for discussion around the country; towns in Vermont, where 50 of 54 town meetings have adopted anti-war resolutions;¹³ and the chief prosecutor for the US at Nuremberg, who stated this was an 'aggressive war.'

This snowballing opinion against the war was reflected in the success of anti-war candidates in both Republican and Democrat-dominated areas, and in the House 'breakthrough wins' in New Hampshire, Iowa, Minnesota and California.¹⁴

The Economy

According to some exit polls, 50% of voters thought that the economy was not good or poor, with 31% stating that they were 'getting ahead' financially.¹⁵ A poll in October found 63% stating that the economy was not good or poor, 33% stating good, and 4% stating excellent.¹⁶

While polls often serve to misrepresent actual opinion, the above figures do closely track the class structure in the US.¹⁷ Contrary to the image of a well-off and middle-class dominated society:

62% of workers are in the working class – meaning that most income is spent on necessary consumption, and the jobs held involve no control over work and no supervisory functions. (The 20% of people above the working class spend 5/6 of their *pre-tax* income on necessary consumption.)

36% fall into the middle class of professionals, small businessmen, managers and supervisors.

2% constitute the capitalist class – the corporate elite, senior executives and directors.

The actual ruling class, those having a national impact, numbers 54,000.

While the administration pointed to a low official unemployment rate (4.6%), and moderate inflation and GDP growth, the reality for many people is quite bleak. The number of underemployed, which includes the unemployed, is now about 8%.¹⁸ The economic upswing after the 2001-2002 recession saw an unprecedented lack of job creation, with people being unemployed for longer periods. The recession, job outsourcing and effects of free trade agreements have resulted in the loss of many higher-paid jobs (including in manufacturing and those providing union membership). And job losses have affected people across educational levels. In addition, many of the new jobs created have been in lower-paid industries and the retail sector. Thus, people finding new jobs after a period of unemployment often face a reduction in earnings.¹⁹

By income, statistics show that half of all workers earn less than \$30,000 a year; 70% earn less than \$50,000; and 90% earn less than \$100,000.²⁰ But in considering the standard of living issue, it is important to focus on households and wealth (a function of income plus assets minus debt), and to include the factor of taxation. Even before the 2001 recession, income inequality was worse than had been seen since the 1920s (before the Great Depression).²¹ Statistics on income received by each fifth of households, and for the top 15% and 5%, show the following:²²

	lowest 20%	next 20%	lowest 20%	middle 60%	bottom 20%	next 20%	top 15%	top 5%
1979	5.4	11.6	17.5	34.5	24.1	41.4	26.1	15.3
2000	4.3	9.8	15.5	29.6	22.8	47.4	26.6	20.8
2003	4.1	9.6	15.5	29.2	23.3	47.6	27.1	20.5

Between 2000 and 2003 the average income of middle-income earners fell, and the median household income of families headed by someone under the age of 55 also fell (for whites, blacks and Latin Americans), with losses greater for younger families.²³ In addition, between the end of 2003 and August 2006 the average wage of non-supervisory workers fell by 2%, and in 2005 the top 20% of earners took in 50.4% of total income.²⁴

The federal tax cuts passed in 2001 and 2003 (on incomes, capital gains and dividends) provided most of the benefit to the top 20% of income earners; in 2004, those earning over \$100,000 received 59% of the gains and those earning under \$30,000, 8%.²⁵ It is estimated that in the 2001-2016 period,

53% of benefits will go to the top 10%, and more than 15% to the top 1/1000th. With regard to capital gains and dividends, 53% of benefits will go to the top 1%.²⁶

With regard to debt, in 2005 households spent a record average of 13.75% of after-tax (disposable) income on debt service, and the US now has a negative personal savings rate;²⁷ in 2003 household debt stood at 114.5% of disposable personal income.²⁸

In terms of wealth, in 2001 the top 1% of households held 33% of national wealth, and the bottom 80% held 16%. Households with zero or negative wealth numbered 17.6% (whites 13.1% and blacks 30.9%). Finally, stockholding figures (stocks plus retirement accounts) show that in 2001, 1% of stockowners held 33.6% (by value), and the bottom 80% held 10.7%. Regarding stocks alone, the top 1% of households held 44.9%, the top 10% held 85.1%, and bottom 80% held 5.8%.²⁹

According to federal statistics, 12.1% of people (34.6 million) lived in poverty in 2002. This number is based on *pre-tax* income, by household type. In 2003, for example, a family consisting of two parents and two children had to gross \$18,660 to avoid official poverty; and a single parent with two children, \$14,824. Some analysts insist, however, that when the basics of food, clothing, shelter, taxes and childcare are figured in, a doubling of the official poverty standards is necessary; by this calculation, in 2002, 30.5% of people were in poverty.³⁰

Thus, one can begin to see the economic issues underlying the 2006 election. One might add that while corporate profits have more than doubled since 2000 (a much high rate than under presidents Clinton or Reagan),³¹ the number of people without health insurance continues to rise (about 16%, or 48 million), and for those who have it, it costs more. The importance of several pieces of the Republican agenda also becomes apparent: the attempt to privatize part of the federal Social Security program (to enable some workers to invest contributions in the stock market) met with great opposition and was defeated in Congress; a measure that passed, however, changed the program's prescription drug component to provide a huge subsidy to the pharmaceutical industry.

Finally, the centrality of the issue of the federally mandated minimum wage becomes clear (60% of earners are women), especially since any increase impacts rates above the minimum. Last raised in 1998 to \$5.15 per hour, a 40-hour week brings in about \$10,700 per year, *before* taxes. So severe

is the situation that by the year 2000, more than 60 cities had raised the rate,³² and before the mid-term elections, 22 states and the District of Columbia had raised it. The rate in Santa Fé, New Mexico, is now \$9.50 per hour, and in July Chicago mandated \$10 per hour for workers in 'big-box' stores such as Wal-Mart, Toys 'R' Us and Home Depot.³³ Finally, *The New York Times* reported in 2006 that for the first time a minimum-wage earner could not afford a one-bedroom apartment at market price anywhere in the US,³⁴ this in the context of more than 25% of households consisting of one person.

Ethics: Civil Liberties and Scandals

After 11 September 2001 there has been the most severe erosion of civil liberties in the US since the 'McCarthy era.' At the same time, actions by the US government abroad, associated with the war in Iraq and on 'terrorism,' have earned the condemnation of the world.

The Patriot Act of October 2001 incorporates and sometimes amends provisions in laws and criminal codes pertaining to the investigation of foreign targets, to apply to domestic 'terrorism' targets. One of these laws is the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) of 1978, which has provisions regarding electronic surveillance, access to business records, physical searches, and the issuance of search warrants that are not a matter of public record. With regard to the latter, a special FISA Court was set up to approve such requests when, in theory, the normal court procedure was deemed to be too slow; the Act provided for a standard of reasonable, as opposed to probable, cause. Among the more controversial provisions of the Patriot Act are: the power to delay notification of the execution of a search warrant, and of the items seized, with no notification required regarding phone records; the ability to use of the FISA Court for such warrants; the ability of the FBI to access library and bookstore records of anyone connected to an investigation, via the FISA court, with the recipient barred from making the demand public; the creation of a foreign student monitoring program;³⁵ the criminalizing of material aid and advice to terrorists and foreign terrorist organizations: the ability to "freeze the assets of suspected charities without any showing of wrongdoing, and based on secret evidence; and permitting foreign nationals to be locked up without charges, deported for innocent political associations and kept out of the country for endorsing any group the government labels as 'terrorist' ..."³⁶

The Patriot Act contained permanent provisions and temporary ones that needed reauthorization by the end of 2005, subsequently extended to March 2006, when Congress made all but two of the temporary provisions permanent, after some minor changes: approval regarding library and medical records must be obtained from the director or deputy director of the FBI; and recipients of orders regarding library and bookstore records may inform their lawyers. In September 2005 the American Civil Liberties Union estimated that there were 30,000 information demands being made each year. Over 400 charges had been filed, with half of cases resulting in conviction or guilty pleas. On the local level, 8 states and 396 cities and counties have passed resolutions against the Act and its violation of civil liberties.

Among other important Congressional measures are: the December 2005 McCain amendment, which bars cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment to anyone, including foreigners held outside of the US; the Graham-Levin amendment, that restricts habeas corpus review for those held at Guantánamo Bay³⁷; and most importantly (and just after the Supreme Court prohibited the trial and execution of enemy combatants based on coerced testimony, hearsay and classified evidence), the September 2006 Military Commissions Act, which sets up special courts, allows such evidence, and virtually nullifies the McCain amendment.³⁸ Finally with regard to civil liberties, in December 2005 it came to light that President Bush had secretly authorized warrantless wiretapping by the National Security Agency, a violation of the FISA.³⁹

Administration and Republican actions regarding the war, economy and civil liberties has occurred in the context of, and has contributed to, a general climate of high-handedness, arrogance and hypocrisy, which is superbly illustrated in the mushrooming scandals surrounding government.

A few examples will suffice, the prime one involving the dealings of political lobbyist Jack Abramoff, a conservative connected to the religious Right, and whose background involves activities on behalf of the Republican Party and in the 1980s of Oliver North and the Nicaraguan contras.⁴⁰ Abramoff was a paid lobbyist for several Native American tribes attempting to protect their casino interests. In 1995, legislation to tax such casinos was defeated in Congress, with Rep. Tom DeLay (Republican, Texas, and from 2003 the House majority leader) a prime actor. Abramoff worked with former DeLay aide Michael Scanlon, and with the former chief of staff of Rep. Bob Ney (Republican, Ohio). Abramoff admitted to bribing Rep. Ney, and in early 2006 pleaded guilty

to three criminal felony counts (conspiracy, fraud and tax evasion). Scanlon and the former chief of staff to Ney pleaded guilty to conspiracy; and in September Ney pleaded guilty to conspiracy and false statements. In Louisiana, Alabama and Texas, Abramoff worked for Native American casino interests against the establishment of new casinos; in this effort he paid for the assistance of Ralph Reed, co-founder of the Christian Coalition, who set up anti-gambling coalitions among his constituency (without their knowing of the Abramoff connection). Reed contested the Republican primary in the race for lieutenant governor of Georgia in July, losing 56-44%.⁴¹

Other Abramoff activities included working against giving the minimum wage to workers in the US-controlled Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a successful effort in which DeLay and Montana Senator Conrad Burns were involved. In 2001-2002, Abramoff also worked for the Guam Superior Court against the establishment of a (higher) supreme court. When the US attorney in Guam, Frederick Black, started to investigate Governor Gutierrez for diversion of funds, the latter hired Abramoff to smear the attorney as a 'Clintonite'; Black also started to investigate Abramoff. The Department of Justice replaced and demoted Black in late 2002.⁴² Abramoff was also involved with a partner in an attempt to buy SunCruz Casinos in Florida; the two concocted a fake wire transfer in order to qualify for a loan, and were convicted on two criminal felony counts. In November Abramoff began serving time in a minimum-security jail, while cooperating with authorities and while several investigations continue. In 2006 DeLay was indicted for violation of Texas state election law; he resigned as majority leader, withdrew from the House race, and in June resigned from the House.

There is no doubt that the immediacy of the Abramoff scandals affected the November vote. Beyond Abramoff, however, lie allegations concerning the Houston, Texas, company Halliburton Energy Services (of which Vice-President Cheney was made chairman and CEO in 1995), and its range of high-cost and/or no-bid contracts in Iraq; and investigation of which had been blocked by Republicans in the Senate. And then there was the matter of Rep. Mark Foley of Florida, who resigned before the election after publicity about his email overtures to male House pages – with the House Republican leadership knowing about it and doing nothing

And so?

And so, eyes will be on the new Congress. Watch to see what action the divided Democrats take on Iraq – an alternative is now demanded; and the nature and progress of investigations undertaken regarding the decision to go to war. Watch for quick action on the minimum wage; but, and more indicative, the measures taken regarding taxation, financial regulation and health insurance. Watch to see what action is taken with regard to the Patriot Act and the Military Commissions Act, and to the status of detainees at Guantánamo Bay and beyond. Monitor congressional treatment of the president's right-wing court nominees. See if Democratic action on environmental issues in any way comes close to the sentiments of the population, which is far ahead of Washington. And watch to see if the Democratic Congress makes serious efforts to reform campaign finance, and to correct voting irregularities.

The agenda is huge, and the leadership of both parties do agree on the main aim of US policy – to maintain and expand global economic supremacy, with the related neoliberal agenda. Their success will be greatly impacted by resistance within the US itself. In that sense, the wins in November 2006 have opened the political space, and progressive ideas and policies will gain more exposure – their proponents should be supported by people everywhere.

Postscript: With regard to Iraq, as of early March, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted against the troop build-up announced by President Bush, but Republicans blocked debate in the full Senate. The House passed a non-binding resolution against the build-up, and divided Democrats are considering several plans for troop withdrawal. With regard to the minimum wage, the House and Senate both passed bills to raise it by \$2.10 to \$7.25/hour. The Senate bill, however, would phase in the increase over two years and contains tax concessions to small businesses; the House and Senate have not yet reconciled the two bills. At present, about 479,000 people earn the \$5.15 minimum, and 5.6 million earn less than \$7.25. With regard to the Patriot Act, the Department of Justice admitted that the FBI has broken the law in obtaining information without official authorization and in non-emergency situations; it has also under-reported to congress its issuance of demands for information (over 140,000 requests, 2003-2005); both the House and Senate are to conduct hearings. With regard to the president's 2001 authorization of warrantless domestic spying, the Senate Judiciary Committee has obtained and is seeking still greater

access to administration records. Finally, with regard to corruption, former Rep. Ney is now serving a 2-1/2-year jail term in connection with the Abramoff scandal. And, a jury has just convicted Vice-President Cheney's former chief of staff, Lewis Libby, of lying about his knowledge of administration leaks that revealed the identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame Wilson. Plame's husband, Joseph Wilson, had refuted the administration's pre-war claim that Saddam Hussein had sought uranium from Niger. Libby is the first White House official to be convicted since the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s.

End Notes

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- ⁶ John Nichols, "Power Shifts in the States," *The Nation*, 4 December 2006, 5-6.
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- ⁸ Ari Berman, "The Democrats: Still Ducking," *The Nation*, 27 March 2006, 21.
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- ¹³ Above examples from John Nichols, "Bringing the War Home," *The Nation*, 27 March 2006, 4-5.
- ¹⁴ Editorial, *The Nation*, 27 November 2006, 3; and Nichols, "Measuring the Mandate," 4.
- ¹⁵ Jane Bryant Quinn, "The Economic Perception Gap," *Newsweek*, 20 November 2006, 39.
- ¹⁶ John Maggs, "The Republican Economy," *National Journal*, 13 October 2006.
- ¹⁷ Michael Zweig, "Six Points on Class," *Monthly Review*, July-August 2006, 116-117; and John Bellamy Foster, "The Household Debt Bubble," *Monthly Review*, May 2006, 1.
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²⁴ Maggs.
²⁵ Maggs.
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²⁷ Magdoff, 11.
²⁸ Mishel, et al., 299.
²⁹ Mishel, et al., 10, 187, 277.
³⁰ Mishel, et al., 12, 309.
³¹ Maggs.
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³³ Katrina vanden Heuvel and Sam Graham-Felsen, "Chicago's Living Wage," *The Nation*, 25 September 2006, 10.

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³⁷ Cole, "Patriot Act Post-Mortem," 5.
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³⁹ Athan G. Theoharis, "The FISA File," *The Nation*, 6 March 2006, 7.
⁴⁰ Unless otherwise noted, see en.wikipedia.org (Jack Abramoff).
⁴¹ On Ralph Reed, see Max Blumenthal, "Abramoff's Evangelical Soldiers," *The Nation*, 20 February 2006, 16-18; and Bob Moser, "The Devil Inside," *The Nation*, 17 April 2006, 11-12.
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RIGHT PEOPLE, WRONG QUESTION

Gloria Steinem

Even before Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton threw their exploratory committees into the ring, every reporter seemed to be asking which candidate are Americans people more ready for, a white woman or a black man?

With all due respect to the journalistic dilemma of reporting two "firsts" at the same time - two visible presidential candidates who aren't the usual white faces over collars and ties - I think this is a dumb and destructive question.

It's dumb because most Americans are smart enough to figure out that a member of a group may or may not represent its interests. After all, many African-Americans opposed the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme court in 1991 because they were aware of his record - and the views of his conservative supporters.

Similarly, most women weren't excited about Elizabeth Dole as a presidential candidate for the 2000 election because she seemed more attached to those in power than those in need of it. Indeed, Elizabeth Dole even got support from people who opposed women making their own reproductive decisions. (If Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decides

to run for president, I imagine that she would face the same fate.)

The question is also destructive because it's divisive. In fact, women of all races and men of color - who together form an underrepresented majority of this country - have often found themselves in coalition. Both opposed the wars in Vietnam and Iraq more and earlier than their white male counterparts. White women have also been more likely than white men to support pro-equality candidates of color, and people of color have been more likely to support pro-equality white women.

It's way too early to know which candidate will earn trust or survive swift-boating, but forcing a choice between race and sex only conceals what's really going on.

So far, for example, polls show that about 60 percent of African-American Democrats support Hillary Clinton, while only about 20 percent support Barack Obama. These surprising numbers probably have less to do with Senator Obama himself than with whether people feel he's been around long enough to trust, whether the name "Clinton," with its association of racial inclusiveness, is a better bet,