

Howard, Bush and Mandates: the 2004 U.S. and Australian Elections Compared

Simon Jackman
Stanford University

There are many superficial similarities between the elections held last year in Australia and the United States. The two elections were held within a month of each other. The incumbent prime minister and president won, both of them conservative, both of them partners in the war in Iraq. Both incumbents' parties increased their vote share and seat shares in their respective national legislatures. In Australia, Labor won less than 48% of the two-party preferred vote in the House of Representatives, its lowest vote share since losing 1996, and in only 6 elections since 1949 has Labor performed won a smaller two-party preferred vote share (1996, 1977, 1975, 1966, 1958 and 1955). After July 1, 2005, the Coalition will have 39 seats in the 76 seat Senate (a gain of four seats), giving an incumbent government a majority in the Senate for the first time since 1981. In the United States, George W. Bush won a majority of the votes cast (50.7%), the first time the winner of a presidential election has won with a majority since the election of Bush's father in 1988 (George W. Bush's win in 2000, along with Clinton's wins in 1992 and 1996 were with less than 50% of the popular vote), although, by historical standards, a close election outcome (in fact, Bush's winning margin is the smallest of any president to be re-elected since 1948). Republicans retained control of the House of Representatives (winning 232 of the 435 seats, the largest Republican seat total in the House since 1946, with 50.1% of the vote), and increasing their majority in the Senate (from 51 to 55 seats, with 51.0% of the vote), defeating the leader of the Democrats in the Senate (Tom Daschle, of South Dakota).

These losses were soul-shattering for the respective opposition parties and their supporters. On the other hand, conservatives in both the United States and Australia seem emboldened by the respective election outcomes. Consider the outlook in the United States: partial privatization of Social Security, long considered to be political poison in the United States, is being aggressively promoted by the 2nd Bush administration; a flat-rate federal income tax is getting the most serious consideration it has ever enjoyed; it is quite likely that Bush will make multiple appointments to the Supreme Court; the U.S. Department of Defense spends about 1.4 billion U.S. dollars *per day*, up about 33% since 2001, while many discretionary, domestic programs are being held in check or cut; federal spending on environmental protection remains at 7 billion *per year* (no growth since 2001). In Australia, with the government set to take control of the Senate in July 2005, far-reaching changes to the industrial relations regime are being contemplated (including federalizing the entire system, reducing the powers of the Industrial Relations Commission

and moving away from the award system), the full privatization of Telstra is likely, restrictions on cross-media ownership are likely to be relaxed, amendments to the Commonwealth *Electoral Act* seem probable (e.g., restrictions on electoral enrollment), and some Coalition parliamentarians are floating the idea that the Commonwealth legislate to restrict access to abortion. At first glance, it seems that the two elections were both conservative triumphs, giving the respective leaders mandates for policy change.

Well, yes and no. In this brief essay I want to first question the claim that these were in fact decisive wins by the conservative parties. I then examine the claim that both victors won mandates for conservative policies in their respective countries. Bush appears to be more enthusiastically claiming a mandate than is Howard, in part because he incentives to do, but also because he can probably lay a greater claim to actually having a mandate. In the end, the presence of compulsory voting in Australia (the consistently high rates of voter turnout it produces) means that the Australian election produced a much clearer signal as to voters' preferences than did the American presidential election.

Close-Run Things? In the Australian election for the House of Representatives, the Liberal Party (and the CLP in the Northern Territory) won 75 of 150 seats, the Nationals 12, the ALP 60, and three independents retained their seats. Labor could have forced the Coalition to minority government status by winning 72 seats (with the three independents, that would leave the Coalition with 75 seats, or one short of a majority). Imagine a scenario in which the ALP (1) wins every seat it actually won in 2004, and (2) wins the 12 most marginal seats won by the Coalition, a list of seats ranging from Kingston (SA), where the ALP lost by just 61 votes (two-party preferred), to Page (NSW), where the ALP lost by 3,284 votes. Had Labor won an extra 13,902 two-party preferred votes across those 12 seats (i.e., winning each of those 12 seats by just one vote), then it would have won 72 seats, generating a hung parliament (ALP 72, independents 3, the Coalition 75). Of course, this is a rather fanciful scenario, but underscores the maxim that electoral politics is played on the margins. Those 14,000 extra votes are roughly one-tenth of one percentage point of the 11.7 million formal votes cast in the 2004 election. That relative handful of extra votes stand between Labor just barely scraping across the line, and the the typical "doom and gloom" post-election assessments of the ALP's prospects.

A similar exercise can be performed for the U.S. presidential election. The Democratic candidate, John Kerry, won 48.3% of the vote, carrying 18 states plus the District of Columbia, for a total of 252 Electoral College votes. The 2000 election made the otherwise-obscure Electoral College infamous, but a brief refresher is warranted: each state is allocated as many electors in the Electoral College as its has members of Congress (its House delegation, roughly a function of population, plus the two senators of each state), and the District of Columbia has 3 Electoral College votes; in almost all states, whoever wins the most votes claims all that state's Electoral College votes, and the winner of the election is the candidate who wins a majority of the 538 Electoral College votes. Kerry narrowly lost New Mexico, trailing Bush by 5,988 votes (5 Electoral College votes), Iowa by 10,059 votes (7 Electoral College votes) and Nevada by 21,500 votes (5 Electoral College votes); had Kerry carried those states, plus the states he did carry, then the result in the Electoral College would have been Kerry 270 to Bush 268. That is, had 18,774 Bush voters

switched to Kerry, a miniscule 0.015% of the more than 122 million votes cast, spread out across three states in the right mix, then John Kerry would be president.

Mandates Claimed vs Mandates Won. To what extent does either election result support any claim for a conservative policy mandate? As the counter-factual analysis above suggests, we ought to be skeptical about claims for mandates given anything other than a landslide victory. That said, conservatives in the United States seem more enthused by their win than conservatives in Australia, despite the fact that the relative margin of their win is not as large as the conservative victory in Australia. The proportion of Australian voters that preferred the Coalition over Labor exceeds the proportion of American voters that preferred Bush over Kerry (although, I show below, compulsory voting ensures that “the electorate” constitutes a far greater proportion of the population than in the U.S.). Yet John Howard does not appear to have anything close to as bold a conservative agenda as do Republicans in Washington. Indeed, caution seems the current order of the day among conservative ranks in Australia, with the Prime Minister cautioning ministers and backbenchers against giddiness at the prospect of gaining control of the Senate, and pouring water on some of the more radical proposals to be floated by some Coalition parliamentarians, particularly proposals to restrict access to abortion (e.g., “Voters jittery over Coalition’s Senate control”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 16, 2005). In short, Howard seems reluctant to claim a mandate for conservative policies, while Bush is much more forthcoming, as revealed in the the following exchange from Bush’s first press conference after his re-election in November 2004 (see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/11/200411104-5.html>):

Q: I’m interested in ... whether you feel more free to do any one thing in a second term that perhaps you were politically constrained from doing in a first.

A: ...I feel it is necessary to move an agenda that I told the American people I would move.... And after hundreds of speeches and three debates and interviews and the whole process, where you keep basically saying the same thing over and over again, that when you win, there is a feeling that the people have spoken and embraced your point of view.... Let me put it to you this way: I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.

There are several reasons for Bush’s exuberance relative to Howard’s. First, if Bush wants to accomplish anything, he *needs* to be exuberant, and now; twelve months from now, the Congress will be focusing on the 2006 midterm elections, and after that, political attention will turn towards the 2008 presidential elections, and Bush will be a term-limited “lame duck” president. Howard, on the other hand, is not term-limited is in no hurry to leave office. Moreover, Howard has important policy initiatives already his belt from his first three terms (e.g., significant changes to taxation and industrial relations). More generally, the overall impression of Howard is that he does not take political risks unless absolutely necessary: the Prime Minister that gave us “relaxed and comfortable” is hardly the sort to get too far ahead of public opinion on many issues, or see the period between July 2005 and the next Federal election as the one and only chance to bring about conservative policy goals.

Bush vs Kerry: a stark choice. Conservatives claim a mandate in the United States not because they won by a large margin, but because they had so much riding on the result. The 2004 U.S. presidential election was nothing if not a referendum on tax reform, a neo-conservative foreign policy, and, above all, the conduct of the war on terror. Thus, the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign was perhaps the most ideological in recent years, probably on a par with the Reagan-Carter contest of 1980. Passions ran high on both sides. The closeness of the 2000 election and the bitterness of its aftermath (the Florida recount, the Supreme Court dividing 5-4 to end the recount, and thereby election to Bush) had not been forgotten by partisans of either stripe. Frankly, the 2004 election would have shaped up as a hotly contested election even without 9/11, a lackluster economy, the war on terror, and Iraq.

To many Democrats, George W. Bush's presidency represented a heist of American democracy. Underpinning their outrage is the firm belief that Republicans stole the 2000 election, or at the very least, Bush was presiding without the support of most Americans. In addition: the Bush administration implemented tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the rich; the Bush administration cynically exploited the tragedy of September 11, 2001, spreading the lie that there were ties between al Qaeda and Iraq, leading the United States into an open-ended, costly and bloody war in Iraq (but with significant benefits to wealthy friends and donors in defense industries), while running up record budget deficits; the Bush administration kowtowed to its Christian fundamentalist support base, substituting passion and faith for logic and fact in everything from justifications for the Iraq War, to prioritizing a missile defense system over counter-terrorism in the fateful months before September 11, to its head-in-the-sand approach on energy policy and the environment, to its policy on embryonic stem-cell research.

On the right, an entirely different picture prevailed. George W. Bush was seen as a thoroughly decent man, not a smooth-talker like Clinton or Kerry, but a man who (like many evangelical Christians) had come to his faith relatively late in life, and, whatever the circumstances of his winning the presidency, now faced a challenge of literally biblical proportions -- to lead America in a war that America had not asked for, against an enemy unlike any America had previously encountered. September 11, 2001, was nothing less than an outrage, an extraordinary attack directed against civilians (the death toll exceeded that caused by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), and so demanded an extraordinary response; if that response upset the *New York Times* readership or the Europeans, then so be it. The fact that there was no compelling evidence to connect the Iraqi regime with al Qaeda was either not accepted or ignored; either way, there was simply no place for someone like Saddam Hussein in a strategically-sensitive country like Iraq in a post-9/11 environment. And, while the human loss and cost of prosecuting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were (and are) undeniably large and bitter, there had not been another al Qaeda attack on American soil since 9/11. The Christian right well understood that Bush's openness about his religious beliefs and his frequent use of evangelical rhetoric was derided by some of Bush's opponents, but, like so many criticisms of Bush, served only to strengthen Bush's standing among evangelicals. Many on the right believed that it was providential that Bush was president at this decisive period of American history: Rudolph Giuliani, mayor of New York City at the time of the 9/11 attacks, told the 2004 Republican

Convention (in New York) that on the morning of the attacks he declared “Thank God George Bush is our President”, and invited his audience to compare Bush’s clarity and consistency with that of his Democratic opponent. Kerry, on the other hand, did himself no favors on this score, apparently shifting his position on the Iraq War, and delivering the Bush campaign a gift with his convoluted admission that in U.S. Senate “he voted for the [Iraq] war before he voted against it.”

These two radically different views of Bush, his administration, and the Iraq war underscored the nature of the choice confronting American voters in 2004. Bush and Kerry offered quite different approaches to governing America and prosecuting the war on terror, generating an intensity that the Howard-Latham contest never approximated in Australia. Two quite different presidencies were offered to the American electorate. Sixty-two million voters chose four more years of Bush-Cheney; fifty-nine million chose Kerry-Edwards, and the minor party and independent vote collapsed to less than a percentage point of all votes cast (the lowest rate of minor party voting since 1988, and in a year when voter turnout soared; see below). The fact that Bush won given the intensity of the campaign and the nature of the differences between the two candidates, is what Bush means when he claims to have won political capital during the campaign.

Compulsory vs Voluntary Turnout. It is difficult to understate the consequences of non-compulsory voter turnout for understanding electoral politics in the United States (and indeed, in most countries around the world). A sense of civic duty and/or the threat of a fine for not voting is apparently sufficient incentive for roughly 95% of enrolled Australian voters to routinely turn out at a Federal election. Given that Australian voters are virtually guaranteed to turn out, the Australian politician’s task is solely one of voter *persuasion*. But in the United States, persuasion is fundamentally confounded with voter *mobilization*. Commanding the loyalties of a majority of the electorate is of no political consequence if one’s partisans do not turn out to vote.

Underscoring Bush’s claim for a mandate is that he won a majority of the vote in what is a high turnout election, at least by U.S. standards. In fact, one of the more politically significant lessons of the 2004 U.S. election was the convincing demonstration that higher turnout does not necessarily help Democrats. Voter turnout, as a percentage of the voting eligible population, was 60% in 2004, up from 54.2% in 2000 and on a par with 1992 (a relatively high turnout election with the Perot and Clinton candidacies mobilizing many would-be abstainers); see http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. In fiercely contested, “battleground” states like Ohio and Florida, turnout was considerably higher than the national average, rising from 56.7% in 2000 to 66.8% in 2004 in Ohio (a relative increase of 18%), and from 55.9% to 65.2% in Florida (a relative increase of 17%).

These large increases in voter registration and turnout were generated by ferocious mobilization efforts and media advertising by both major parties (the two campaigns and affiliated groups spent over \$100 million dollars on television and radio advertising in Ohio alone; a highly-placed Kerry operative conceded that the Kerry operation had more money than knew what to do with in Ohio, but they’d literally run out of ad time to buy, and voters to mobilize). The point here is that the Democrats threw everything they had at

these two states, actually out-spending the Republicans with ad buys. And yet Bush prevailed, further bolstering his claim for a mandate.

The origins of both parties' mobilization efforts lie in the results of the 2000 election, which clearly indicated that Florida and Ohio would be pivotal in 2004. The Republicans implemented a multi-year, centralized and highly organized voter registration program, making significant use of evangelical churches to contact and mobilize otherwise hard to contact citizens in so-called "ex-urban" regions of these (and other) states. It bears stressing that not everyone who voted for Bush is an evangelical Christian; but it is the case that of evangelical Christians turning out to vote, the vast majority voted for Bush. It is also the case that evangelical Christians constitute a minority, but a growing segment of the national electorate. Flushed with success, the Republican mobilization apparatus and its connection to the evangelical movement is not going away, and will play a key role in the midterm elections of 2006, and the presidential contest in 2008. Bush's challenge (and that of future Republican presidential candidates) will be to satisfy the fundamentalist Christian constituency that was key to his successes in 2000 and 2004 without losing support among Republican moderates and independents. In other words, political analysts aren't the only ones who are struggling to understand the limits of Bush's mandate; I suspect Bush and his advisors are trying to figure that out as well.

One final point: these increases in U.S. voter turnout bring voter turnout up to levels Australia hasn't seen since the advent of compulsory voting in the 1920s. And in this regard, Australia provides an important contrast with the United States. If the Liberal-National coalition wins 52.7% of the two-party preferred vote, with 94% of all enrolled voters voting (with enrolled voters comprising about 98% of Australia's adult citizen population), then the Coalition's support amounts to approximately 48.5% of the adult citizenry. Contrast the United States, where Bush won 50.7% of the votes cast by 60% of the voting eligible population, or about 30.4% of the adult citizenry. By this standard, any conclusion that Bush has a greater claim to a conservative mandate than Howard has to be regarded with suspicion. Of course, Bush isn't assessing his "political capital" with reference to Howard's win in Australia (or vice-versa), highlighting the limitations of comparing the two election outcomes.

Similarities between the two elections and their outcomes are plentiful, but many are superficial. Understanding the causes and the political implications of the two election outcomes requires an understanding of the institutional configurations of Australia and the United States. In particular, term limits give Bush a tremendous incentive to vigorously claim a conservative policy mandate, while the prospect of future election victories gives Howard reason to be cautious about over-reaching. Winning a high turnout election bolsters Bush's claim to a mandate, while the institution of compulsory voting means turnout is irrelevant in interpreting Howard's win in Australia. Keeping these institutional differences in mind is vital for Australians seeking to understand American politics, and vice-versa.

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Biographical information: Simon Jackman is Associate Professor of Political Science and (by courtesy) of Statistics at Stanford University, in Northern California. Originally from Queensland, he has been based in the United States since 1988, and has published extensively on American and Australian politics. e-mail: jackman@stanford.edu