

# Al is waiting in the wings as Hillary and Barack battle it out

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For some reason, many in Britain have come to view the process by which America elects its presidents as decidedly inferior to the one by which Britain elects its leaders. It isn't. Indeed, the two systems are more similar than at first appears.

In America it is possible for a party to win the most popular votes, but fail to win the presidency; in Britain, the party garnering the most popular votes might be unable to muster the parliamentary majority needed to form a government. In both Britain and America the mechanics of voting are imperfect. America has had those hanging chads in Florida, machines that malfunction, and polls that close too early to accommodate all voters. But Britain has its postal voting glitches, outright fraud, and confusingly complicated ballots, all, it seems, unavoidable in a mass-voting democracy, but no problem in such places as Saddam's Iraq and Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Which brings us to money, supposedly a peculiarly American curse. Not so: money talks, as they say, in both countries. In America each candidate must raise at least \$10 million per month if he, or in one case, she, is to remain competitive in a primary contest that involves purchasing large quantities of television time in the expensive New York, California and Florida markets. This requires Democratic candidates to jet to Hollywood to express their concern about global warming at flood-lit, air-conditioned events sponsored by some star, and to stop off in Greenwich, Connecticut, to assure

the billionaire private equity and hedge fund managers that they will indeed raise taxes on all families earning more than \$200,000 per year. Odd that the mega-rich favour such taxes, but in America billionaires vote Democratic, mere millionaires vote Republican. Hence, Hillary and Barack pass each other flying from Hollywood to Greenwich, leaving carbon footprints that would have David Cameron fuming.

Republicans fill their coffers by assuring Wall Street moguls of their undying hostility to taxes in general, and capital gains, dividend and inheritance taxes in particular. Stop-offs in Texas are also recommended, where audiences are eager to unzip their wallets for anyone favouring subsidies to oil producers, and increasing pressures on Korea and Japan to buy more American beef.

In this respect, too, America is not very different from Britain. True, parliamentary candidates are limited in what they can spend on their election campaigns, (although they do get second residences and iPods at taxpayers' expense). But political parties are nevertheless always as desperate for funds as their US counterparts. Labour needs the dosh that the trade unions and multi-millionaire Iranian and Indian expatriates provide. Both parties launch charm offensives in the City to corral the big donors. No one believes that cash comes without some unspoken promise of access; neither big business nor the trade unions are famous for unrequited generosity. That's as true in the UK as it is in the US, although it must be admitted that dinner at Chequers is not up there



Irwin Stelzer

with an overnighter in the Lincoln bedroom as a prestige-enhancing perk. A peerage, of course, trumps both.

Another similarity is the issue that is dominating the discourse - Iraq. In Britain, voters are searching for the party that promises to arrange the quickest exit. So, too, in America, although most of the hard-core Republicans who vote in primaries support the President's decision to bet on the success of the new troop build-up, the "surge".

Democrats, especially the Left-wing activists who dominate the primaries, want out, somewhere between soon and now. So every candidate for the Democratic nomination is scrambling to get to the Left of his or her rivals. Barack Obama proudly says he was against the war from day one; John Edwards apologises for having supported it, and now calls the war on terror a "bumper sticker", not a policy; Hillary Clinton calls for repeal of the resolution authorising the war and the withdrawal of all troops, but not immediately, and to the Left's consternation refuses to

apologise for having voted in favour of that resolution in the first place. In the Clinton family saying "sorry" is apparently reserved for the man of the house. We are treated to the unedifying spectacle of Hillary Clinton waiting to see how Obama would vote on the bill to fund the troops before casting her own vote. He said "no" to funds, so she followed suit. It seems she voted to send troops to Iraq before she voted against funding them.

On the Republican side, John McCain is finding that age seems to trump heroism, and that adherence to principle - support for a generous immigration bill that would regularise the status of 13 million illegal immigrants - can cost votes. Rudy Giuliani has finally decided to admit that he has always favoured a woman's right to choose, as abortion has come to be called, and hopes that his performance as mayor of New York City - before and after September 11 - will more than offset the revulsion that hard-core Republican voters feel for abortion. And for his support of gay marriage and gun control.

Which creates an opening for Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, a state generally given to electing any Kennedy. Republican Romney managed to overcome that Left-leaning preference, and is hoping that his ability to win in such a Democratic state, and his slick campaign, will make Republican voters forget that he got to the governor's office by favouring abortion (he has since had a Damascus conversion), and gun control (he now remembers being a fearless hunter of squirrels), and see him as the candidate most likely to slay the Hillary dragon.

But all of the efforts of all of these candidates might be for naught. Fred Thompson, on the Republican side, and Al Gore, on the Democratic side, have been watching in amusement. Thompson, beloved by conservatives to be more in tune with their views than any of the candidates now on offer, will announce his candidacy during the Fourth of July weekend, after a visit to London to address the Policy Exchange and hobnob with what passes for conservatives in Britain these days.

Meanwhile, Al Gore tours the US promoting his new book (see reviews before adding to summer reading pile) and his apocalyptic movie, in the process gathering the names of thousands of potential volunteers and campaign donors. Hollywood stars, starlets and moguls stand with chequebooks at the ready should the fortune Gore has made on his Google shares need supplementing. Driving Gore on is his belief that he was cheated in 2000, and that only he can persuade the world to tackle global warming seriously. Equally important is the former vice-president's intense hatred of the Clintons, especially Bill. It is easier for Gore to believe that "Bill's zipper problem" turned thousands of voters away from the Democratic column, than to concede that he is so dull and uncharismatic that even the prosperity to which Clinton-Gore laid claim couldn't provide a ticket to the White House.

Dull and uncharismatic as electorally fatal offsets to prosperity? Now that's one US-UK analogy too far for Gordon Brown to contemplate.

Simon Heffer returns next week