

A Guide for Europeans

How to Read the U.S. Primaries

By VICENTE NAVARRO

I live on both sides of the Atlantic--part of the year in the U.S.A. and the other part in Spain, where I was born. I had to leave Spain because of my active participation in the anti-fascist underground against the Franco dictatorship in the 1950s. I lived for a while in Sweden and Great Britain, and finally settled in the U.S.A., teaching (as I still do) at the Johns Hopkins University. I have been active in U.S. academic and political life for more than 35 years. I was senior advisor to Jesse Jackson Sr. during the Democratic Party primaries of 1984 and 1988. In 1993 I worked in the White House with the Task Force on Health Care Reform, chaired by Hillary Clinton. The Rainbow Coalition and the trade unions of the health care sector (1199 locals) asked Mrs. Clinton to include me on her task force to make sure that "single payer" (the progressive proposal for health care reform) got a hearing. (See my article "Why HillaryCare Failed: Getting the Facts Right" in *Counterpunch*, November 2007.)

On the European side of the Atlantic, I started spending time in Spain after Franco's death and the establishment of democracy, becoming active in academic and political life. I have been advisor to several socialist governments in Spain and to the President of the European Parliament, Josep Borrell.

As a result of these experiences, I believe I know the U.S.A. and the E.U. well, and I am particularly worried by the European press's poor coverage of what is happening in the U.S. presidential primaries--partly through their manipulation of the facts, but often through simple incompetence. I include among these news sources *El Pais*, *Le Monde*, and the *Financial Times*. In their defense, it must be said that the U.S.A. is not an easy country to understand from a European perspective. The political cultures of the two continents are very different, and sometimes even opposite in their terminology or symbols. For example, red has always been the color of the left in Europe. "Reds" are people who hold left-wing views. "Red cities" are cities like Bologna in Italy or Barcelona in Spain that have always been governed by left-wing parties. Blue is the right-wing color. In U.S.A., it's precisely the opposite: "red states" are states won by the Republican Party (defined as the right-wing party) in presidential elections, and "blue states" are those won by the Democratic Party (considered, erroneously, to be the center-left party).

But the differences in political culture are much larger than a matter of the colors assigned to the two major parties. They include the terminology of political discourse. For example, U.S. politicians--such as Jesse Jackson--who call for larger public social expenditures, higher and more progressive taxation, and a greater role

for the federal government in expanding social and labor rights, and who favor federal redistributive policies, are called "liberals." On the contrary, in Europe, a liberal is a politician who calls for precisely the opposite: reduced public social expenditures, lower taxes, and elimination of redistributive policies. Liberal parties are very small parties in Europe, indicating people's limited support for those policies. Yet the European press (including the newspapers noted above) constantly mistranslate the term "liberal" as used in the U.S.A.--writing, for example, that liberals favor higher taxes for the rich, more redistributive policies, and expansions in public social expenditures. Sometimes this misreporting occurs through incompetence, but sometimes intentionally. The right-wing liberal (in the European sense) Mario Vargas Llosa, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, writes in an article in *El Pais* (January 10, 2008) that the most progressive sectors of the U.S. population are liberals (without clarifying that, in European terms, these liberals should be called social democrats). He is fully aware of the distinction, but he does not feel the urge to clarify it.

This type of reporting creates enormous confusion in Europe. It's no wonder that many of my European friends are mystified and tell me they never quite understand the U.S.A. They beg the U.S.A. to join the community of nations and, besides adopting the metric system, to talk like everyone else in the world, where red is red, blue is blue, and a liberal is a right-winger.

There is an urgent need to clarify the use of these terms. In the U.S.A., liberals are New Dealers, named for the New Deal established by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman (at a time when the left had considerable influence in the federal government and among the U.S. intelligentsia). In the Democratic Party, "liberal" and "New Dealer" have been synonymous for many years. Large sectors of the grassroots of the Democratic Party--the trade unions, the civil rights movements, large parts of NOW (National Organization for Women, the largest feminist movement in the U.S.A.), and other social movements--are New Dealers. Most of them would, in the E.U., vote for center-left or left-wing parties.

The leadership of the Democratic Party, since President Carter, has been distancing itself from American liberalism. Actually, most of the Democratic Party candidates in the presidential primaries of 2008 avoid calling themselves "liberals" (Kucinich and Edwards were the exceptions). Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have called for transcending these labels, which is a way of distancing themselves from the (U.S.) liberal tradition. The Democrat who most notably distanced himself from the term and concept of liberal was President Bill Clinton, even though he ran with a clear social democratic platform in 1992--referring to Sweden as an inspiration for his public policies (as noted at the time by the *Financial Times*) and calling for, among other things, a universal health care program. But, once in power, Clinton followed policies--such as elimination of the federal deficit (reducing federal social expenditures) and approval of George H. W. Bush's NAFTA proposal--that antagonized the grassroots of the Democratic Party. These policies were responsible for the high Democratic voter absenteeism in the 1994 Congressional elections and the victory of the Republican Party (the Gingrich Revolution), even though Republicans received almost the same number of votes in 1994 as in 1990, the previous non-presidential Congressional election.

It was President Clinton (not Prime Minister Blair) who, in 1994, instituted the Third Way--a "middle" way between the New Deal and the Gingrich conservatism that had gained control of Congress. Since then, the leaders of the Democratic Party have been on the center-right on domestic policies, and clearly on the right on foreign policies--sensitive to the economic and financial interests that supported and financed their campaigns for office. The foreign policy of recent Democratic administrations has been more interventionist than that of Republican

administrations. And on domestic policies, Europeans are not fully aware of how far to the right the entire political spectrum is in the U.S.A compared with Europe. For example, not one of the 2008 Democratic presidential candidates (except Kucinich, who has left the primary race) has called for a publicly funded national health program (such as exists in all E.U. countries). The proposals for "universal" health care programs, espoused by most Democratic candidates (except Obama) and some Republicans, are basically a call to make health insurance compulsory for everyone. Just as everyone who drives a car must have car insurance, so everyone would have to buy health insurance. These programs would rely on giving people tax incentives and subsidies (that will primarily benefit the insurance companies), without resolving the major problem of health coverage: the high costs and limited benefits of available health insurance coverage. Health benefits *undercoverage* is the largest problem in U.S. medical care; not until they actually need it do most people realize that their insurance does not cover the costs of their medical care. In the E.U., no party would dare challenge public funding as the major source of health care funding--not even the liberal parties. This should give an idea of how far to the right the entire U.S. political system has moved.

A primary reason for this state of affairs is the privatization of the electoral process, a characteristic unique to the U.S. electoral system. Candidates must raise a lot of money to buy access to the media, especially television. The TV industry sells time (completely unregulated) to the highest bidders. Most of the money that finances the campaigns comes from corporate America and the top one-third (by income) of the U.S. population. This would be illegal in all E.U. countries. As a matter of fact, many ministers in European governments have had to resign when it became apparent that they received private funds for electoral purposes. Not so in the U.S.A. A major reason why not a single viable presidential candidate is calling for publicly funded, universal health care (which is favored by most Americans) is the enormous power and influence of health insurance companies in the electoral process. Both Clinton and Obama have received considerable funds from these financial interests. Again, in the E.U., such open financial support of candidates would be illegal and considered corrupt. In the U.S.A., it is both legal and untainted by hints of corruption. According to Common Cause, 94% of candidates who won reelection in the Congressional elections of 2006 were the best-funded candidates. Money is the milk of politics in the U.S.A. And people know it: in polls, 68 per cent of respondents do not consider themselves well-represented in Congress. In no country of the E.U. does the population feel such a high degree of alienation from its government. This explains the high voter absenteeism in the U.S. electoral process.

Returning to the matter of terminology: in the U.S.A., "middle class" means primarily working class. The social structure of the U.S.A., according to the establishment media and political elites, consists of the rich (the corporate class) at one extreme, the poor at the other, and all the rest--the majority--in between (the middle class). *Time Magazine* each year publishes a survey of the population, asking people whether they are members of the "upper," "middle," or "lower" class; the majority of people predictably answer "middle." This is the evidence on which the media base the claim that the majority of people in the U.S.A. consider themselves middle class. In reality, the U.S.A. has a class structure very similar to that of the member countries of the E.U. The U.S.A., however, does not use the term "bourgeoisie." It sounds too French. This class is called the "corporate class." The petit bourgeoisie is the "upper-middle class." The middle class is called "middle class," and the working class is also called "middle class." Thus, the middle class is a broad spectrum that includes the middle class and working class. In this theoretical scenario, class struggle (to the degree that it is ever discussed) is presented as the struggle of the middle class against the interests of the economic and corporate lobbies that "control Washington." The recent presidential candidates

that have best articulated this strategy are those on the left of the Democratic Party (Kucinich and Edwards) and the libertarian candidate in the Republican Party (Paul). [Also Mike Huckabee. Editors.] Most of the Democratic candidates, however, complain that the Bush Administration has divided Americans, accentuating the class and race divide.

Bush has indeed defended and promoted, to an extreme, the interests of his buddies in the corporate class, thus hurting the majority of the popular classes and widening the social and income differentials between those at the top and everyone else. The class divide is larger than ever. Obama and (later) Clinton have called for ending this divide and healing this schism. One can understand the calls to end the race and gender divide. But, what is meant by ending class division? The call by Obama to "unite the rich and the poor" is intriguing to say the least. It seems to assume that rich and poor have a commonality of interests that simply needs to be mobilized for a better America. This certainly makes Obama nonthreatening to the media and to the political establishments (the rich), which may explain the very favorable coverage he is receiving from the establishments' media.

Finally, it may come as a surprise to many on the U.S. left that, at a time when the alienation felt by the Democratic Party base toward its leadership has reached unprecedented levels (the Democratic-controlled Congress is now the most unpopular Congress in the last 40 years), the Party is becoming an inspiration for sectors of the European left. Not only Third Way British ideologues, such as Antony Giddens, but also most of the leadership of the former Communist Party of Italy are making the Democratic Party their point of reference in establishing an Italian and a European Democratic Party. What a transformation! Some left Europeans went from one pole to another, not fully comprehending the situation of the U.S. Democratic Party. It also seems comical that Veltronelli, the Mayor of Rome and presidential candidate of the Italian Democratic Party, refers to himself as the Italian Obama.

As these examples show, there is a great urgency for people who understand the true workings (not an idealized version) of the U.S. political system to help our friends in Europe and elsewhere understand what is going on in the U.S.A. I hope I have contributed to that.

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