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Elections in the USA - The States -

On September 29th the House of Representatives defeated the Bush proposal to grant 700 billion dollars to save failing American banks.

A wave of angry calls from constituents had been received by the Representatives, especially those of the Republican Party, and many were reminded of the upcoming election that is to occur in only a month.

Many people here and in Washington were tearing their hair out over the voting debacle.

“What a degree of **irresponsibility!**”, called many commentators

In line with our theme, I would like to add an opinion:

“What a degree of voter commitment!” Rarely have representatives proven so directly what it means to represent the people (and also quick changes of their opinions as we have seen)

There is another reason why that vote is important for the democratic process. It placed the parliament into the center of public attention. Congress showed its muscles and hinted that the United States is not only be run by its president.

Germany would do well to learn this lesson from the US. The importance of the legislature is not being recognized enough by the media, the citizens or by parliament itself.

This is what we are talking about. The race between McCain and Obama is foremost on our mind. But what the results of the elections mean for the future of the USA and for its role in the world: This is still not clear.

And this is why: While the presidential race is going on, thousands of other elections are occurring throughout the USA, in countless numbers of cities and townships, elections are taking place in over 3,000 counties and up to 15,000 school boards across the U.S., also for other governmental positions such as judges and sheriffs.

Over 200 referendums will be on the ballots and decided in the states, covering topics such as abortion, environmental protection, tax increases for social programs, same-sex marriage, etc.

On the morning of November 5th, we will know more how the fundamentalists did and the environmentalists, whether female candidates succeeded and minority representatives. We will know more about the mood in the United States which the next President will have to take into consideration.

I will concentrate on the state elections and also mention the role of political parties in these

campaigns.

Although 11 governors are also elected, I will focus on the state legislatures. Their significance and political weight of course vary. This diversity for example is reflected in different names of legislative bodies. Most are called "legislature" and they are divided into Houses and Senates, but a few legislatures are also called General Assembly or Legislative Assembly. In Massachusetts and New Hampshire the state legislature is called the General Court. A few states do not talk about a House, but rather an Assembly.

And one more little item: The legislatures consist of two houses and there are 50 states. So, the math reads: $50 \times 2 = 99$ legislative houses! Nebraska has only one house, it is called the Senate, consists of senators and it is nonpartisan.

If we focus on the 50 states and disregard the territories (who also will vote), we learn - to add to the confusion -, that six states this year will not have a state election at all and two others will not have one for their Senate.

Nevertheless, 44 states will elect a total of 5,824 legislators, these are 79% of the seats in both houses. Of these seats at stake, the Democrats hold about 55% and the Republicans about 45%, 21 delegates are independent.

Even in our days when the international community perceived the USA as "Bush Country", it was much more mixed than many thought. Even with the Governors the ratio before the election is 28:22 in favor for the Democrats.

These misconceptions happen when politicians and journalists travel to Washington D.C., only and then think that they know how the US functions. Many things are happening between Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Sacramento, California, which also are important for the USA, perhaps not as much in Pierre, South Dakota or Helena, Montana, but Europe also has its remote capital cities.

The size of the parliament of each state is purely historical and has nothing to do with importance or the population of the state.

California has 40 Senators and 80 Representatives
Minnesota has 67 Senators and 134 Representatives
Colorado has 35 Senators and 65 Representatives
Finally, New Hampshire has 24 Senator and 400 Representatives.

Also the salaries of the legislators vary significantly, but here the differences do have a meaning when you look at the state and its importance. However, I must admit that delegates made up a confusing amount of different systems to figure their income of basic salaries, per diem, accountable and not accountable funds and other allowances. It is very difficult to compare the income therefore. In addition the time the legislatures have to spend in session varies, there are many special sessions, etc. Therefore we can only guess intelligently.

California's salary leads with about \$117,000 for the basic income and a daily allowance of \$170. Maryland is about average with \$43,500 yearly and a daily budget of \$170 for both

accommodation and meals. New Hampshire is last, where all members receive a two year income of \$200 and no daily allowance.

The typical legislator is white, male, well-educated and has the median age of around 53 years.

The current figures show the breakdown of the nation's state legislatures with 23% women, 8% African-American, and 3% Hispanic. This is not representative of their part in the population of course. To contrast this figure, approximately 15% of the seats are held by lawyers.

Enough with figures.

If we normally divide the legislatures into Republicans and Democrats, this seems similar to what we in Germany know about our system of party groups, but this would be misleading.

Parties play a relatively small role in the elections of candidates. Because party committees do not participate in the nomination process and of course have no role in the placement of the candidates on party lists (which do not exist in the US), they have very little say in the legislative work.

Like everything in and about the United States, general statements like that are at the same time right and wrong. This statement is not completely true in the East, where remnants of the old party structure still exist. On the other hand, this statement is more accurate in the West, where historical party structures were never firmly established. And it is possible that in ten years we will develop new facts about party line intensification.

For example, the Republican Party developed a powerful central office with hundreds of employees in the last few years, while Democrats are a little more hesitant, but will probably follow suit.

But the legislatures have an impartial umbrella organization, The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), which they have to belong to. It provides many of the services offered in Germany by party groups in legislatures or by the *Wissenschaftliche Parlamentsdienst* of the legislature. The NCSL services cover a wide field, from training of legislators all the way to legal advice and lobbying for the states.

But when you speak to U.S. legislative delegations these days, the members now voice partisan views much more than years ago. Contrasts between the two parties have become much stronger during the Clinton and Bush administrations.

In addition, parties will become more important in their role as funding centers, especially with campaigns getting to be more and more expensive. It will be a while, though, before parties will be a mutual ideological center for their members.

Because of the majority voting system, the members of legislatures are only obligated to their constituents. Therefore it is also difficult for parties to provide bindingly national issues and convictions. If for example there is an armament factory within a constituency, demobilization loses its charm. Even during the height of the Cold War some Midwestern congressmen wanted to ease relations with the East, so their farmers could sell wheat to Russia.

Certainly candidates will ask their parties for support when they decide to enter a race. However, since practically all of them have to go through a primary contest within their party, committees do not want to take sides early.

The public nature of the selection process in primaries allows the winner to be quite independent. This is quite popular and therefore stressed by the candidate. "The Candidate must be one of us and not be picked in a process which I as citizen cannot influence"

This is how we get the idea of legislators being close to the people. What is important for the constituents? What worries do the people here have? How is the local economy? Have I responded to the concerns of Mrs. Miller (whose concerns can be quite personal)?

Management of the local political office and command of the latest technology therefore is more important than a big speech about social justice. Sometimes German guests are amazed by the seeming rudeness when legislators interrupt a conversation because a voter is on the phone.

A short remark about the **number of staff members** the legislators have. Again, this varies from state to state, from zero in many states to over 20 in California. Often family members help out, or interns who consider working for a legislator an excellent professional opportunity..

As in Germany politics, the parliament and its members generally have a **low** public standing. A common view is that, "My congressperson is great, but congress is good for nothing."

Granting powers to others makes Americans suspicious. And the further away the power the greater the suspicion. "Washington" has a negative connotation, similar to the Europe's idea of "the bureaucracy in Brussels."

Representatives are able to better represent their constituents as they gain experience the longer they stay in office. They also gain power and influence which brings up the topic of "term limits." Just over 20 states have introduced this idea, six of them have since overturned the restriction. Term limits state that a representative may only remain in office for a certain number of terms. This idea is similar to the Green Party when they introduced rotation as a leadership system..

The immediate influence of voters on the legislator's work, restriction in length of service, a low salary and lack of personnel are major obstacles for state legislatures. After all, states are responsible for many issues, such as the ones that are not reserved for the federal level of government, among them the organization of local politics.

Defending the rights of the states against the federal level is a permanent issue. The federal government constantly tries to expand its constitutional powers, for example through financing states' responsibilities or by passing laws which burden the states with additional duties without providing the funds for them. Often members of Congress prefer to bypass their states in order to communicate directly with a community in their constituency. This way the Representative or Senator gets the full benefit of a grant.

Because of the 50 states the United States are such a lively and diverse country. Because of its size alone comparable and nation-wide living standards are not the primary goal of politics, competition among states is possible and desired. That of course strengthens the state legislatures, therefore we should not ignore the important elections which take place in the states on November 4, and we should keep the states in mind when we talk about our partner country.