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America's angry election: TEXT

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Prepare yourself for an unusually divisive year

AND so the greatest show in modern politics rolls back into town. Four years ago, the American presidential election outdid itself in terms of spectacle. First, John McCain ran the front-runner, George Bush, surprisingly close in the race for the Republican nomination. Then, in the real election, the "50:50 nation" produced a dead heat. Finally came the drama of the Florida recount, twisting all the way up to the Supreme Court before Mr Bush was eventually declared the victor. Now 2004 promises to bring an even more combative show.

A surprising number of people will dismiss the contest as mere hoopla. Even in the United States, only around half the electorate will bother to vote. Yet the contest is crucial—and not just because it will choose the most important man in the world. The election will be a verdict on the determined yet controversial way in which Mr Bush has steered his country. It also comes at a time when America is more bitterly divided than it has been for a generation.

The stakes are high for both sides. For Mr Bush, success in November would dispel doubts over the "stolen" election of 2000 and counter the charge that he has exceeded his mandate in the war on terror. For the Democrats, the presidential campaign represents something of a last chance. They look unlikely to regain power in Congress. In the Senate, they are defending more vulnerable seats than the Republicans are, and in the House of Representatives another bout of redistricting to protect incumbents should reinforce the Republicans' position. Hence the Democrats' fear that a Bush victory would allow the Republicans to "conservatise" the country's institutions, particularly the judiciary, for years to come.

If that seems paranoid, it reflects the atmosphere in which the contest will be fought. Much has been made in Europe of the way Mr Bush's policies have set America apart from the rest of the world; less noticed is the way that those policies have polarised his own country.The president's approval ratings show a huge gap between Republicans and Democrats. The divide is geographical, too, with the Bush-loathers clustered along the coasts, particularly in California and New York, and the Bush-lovers buried in the South and the west.

How much is this Mr Bush's fault? American politics has been getting more ideological and partisan for the past quarter-century, as the conservative South has transferred its allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans. Yet the current president, a conservative southerner himself, has tended to exaggerate the split. Right from the beginning, fume his foes, he ignored the narrowness of his mandate and set off in an unambiguously rightward direction, pushing through an even bigger tax cut than he had promised. The tragedy of September 11th produced a rally around the presidency, but many liberal Americans, like many Europeans, have since been taken aback by Mr Bush's hard-line approach to the war on terror.

The division between these two Americas will have an enormous impact on both phases of next year's spectacle. In the primaries, Mr Bush's popularity with the party faithful has already paid off: unlike his father in 1992, who was mauled by a conservative rebellion led by Pat Buchanan, this Bush faces no challenge for his party's nomination. So far, no sitting president who has avoided a primary challenge has lost.

Meanwhile, the Democratic contest has been dominated by the rank-and-file's loathing for Mr Bush and its contempt for the way the Democratic leadership in Washington has kowtowed to the president. Senators John Kerry, Joe Lieberman and John Edwards and Congressman Dick Gephardt have all suffered for supporting the Iraq war; instead, activists have flocked to the standard of Howard Dean, a former governor of tiny Vermont, who opposed the war and promises to represent "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party".

Mr Dean's partisanship has already forced all his rivals, except Mr Lieberman, to step up their own attacks on Mr Bush's foreign policy. Yet their change of tactics has not halted his advance. If the

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