SUPER TUESDAY
Or How to Make Sense of the American Presidential Election (And Why It Matters)

The American presidential election system is long and confusing. However regardless of the outcome in November 2008, it is unlikely that the new president will take a radically different position on American-Georgian relations.

David J. Smith

Iowa, New Hampshire, Super Tuesday and...the Beltway Primary? Americans are in the throes of electing the president they will inaugurate next January 20. The 2008 election has global implications, however, many Americans and most foreigners are unfamiliar with the process that will unfold over the next eleven months and beyond. (The Beltway Primary, by the way, was February 12, when Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC voted in an election named for the highway that circles the American capital.)

Informally, the campaign began the day after the November 2006 Congressional elections, kicking off 730 days of political wrangling.

The formal so-called primary process kicked off on January 3 this year in the small Midwestern state of Iowa. The primary process is a bewildering patchwork of meetings and party elections in which the voters in each state choose who will be the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party and of the Republican Party.

A simple explanation is that there are fifty states and five other jurisdictions that participate in the process, each with distinct electoral laws. Some states have party conventions, others conduct town or neighborhood meetings called caucuses and others hold primary elections. In each state there are two parties, each with its own rules. The result is 110 separate and unique contests. In some states, the two parties do not even vote on the same day.

In each contest, candidates seek enough support to add up to a majority of the delegates to their party’s national conventions. Late this summer, 4049 Democratic Party delegates will meet in Denver and 2381 Republican delegates in Minneapolis for the final tallies that will determine each party’s presidential candidate. That means that to grasp the Democratic nomination, a candidate must garner 2025 delegates. To gain the Republican nod, a candidate must win 1191 delegates.
Then, these two candidates will face off in the November 4 General Election.

It is a long, grueling and costly process. Bill Richardson, Democratic governor of the State of New Mexico—arguably, the best qualified among the 16 candidates who took to the campaign trail this year—quit the race after New Hampshire.

On the other hand, the protracted process allowed Illinois Senator Barack Obama—the first African-American with a real chance to win the presidency—to challenge the once-presumed Democratic Party supremacy of New York Senator Hillary Clinton.

Additionally, the long road also resurrected the moribund campaign of Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona.

America’s electoral patchwork is also a game of strategy. Conventional wisdom is that candidates must participate in the primaries of the smaller, early-voting states. These states do not offer many delegates, however, most candidates calculate, their early publicity value is enormous. If a candidate does not compete in Iowa, New Hampshire and other early-voting states, he or she will fade from the headlines.

In a risky gambit, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani skipped the first six states, instead campaigning in Florida, America’s fourth largest state, which voted on January 29. He needed to win there. He did not, and he is now out of the race.

Then came February 5—Super Tuesday—when twenty-four states with half the country’s population voted. The upshot was dramatic.

On the Republican side, McCain forced well-heeled former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney from the field. McCain will be the Republican Party nominee.

The Democratic Party is down to a two-person race. Super Tuesday brought Obama neck-and-neck with Clinton. With a huge advantage in recent fundraising, Obama now appears to have the momentum as the two face off in Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and other states.

Their focus will be on the American economy, the voters’ number one concern. Foreign policy matters tend to be discussed in domestic contexts. Iraq is the number two concern this year—Americans want to know when the troops will come home. Additionally, they want to hear the candidates’ views on illegal immigration and rising energy costs.

With foreign policy discussed either in domestic terms or not at all, it is hard to glean the candidates’ views on foreign policy during the primary process. However, this should not alarm Georgian observers. All three candidates who could be president—Clinton, McCain and Obama—fit right into the mainstream of post-World War II American foreign policy.
That mainstream has linked all American presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush. It was John Kennedy, a Democrat, who said that America would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

It was Ronald Reagan, a Republican, who said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

Foreign policy differences have emerged from war—Korea, Vietnam, Iraq—and presidents differed in emphasis and style. However, all post-World War II presidents have been internationalists and democracy-builders.

Specifically, US support for Georgia began under President Bill Clinton and continued with bipartisan support under Bush. Most recently, Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Joe Biden, the Committee’s Democratic Chairman, introduced a resolution in support of a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia.

In sum, although McCain has the most foreign policy experience among the three viable presidential candidates, and he is very familiar with Georgia, there is absolutely no reason to believe that Clinton or Obama would alter America’s steadfast support for Georgia.

Of course, the new president will make changes, particularly in personnel. Even if Americans elect McCain, expect a new crew of Republicans in Washington.

A quick glance at the so-called Plum Book shows that the president appoints thousands of senior US government officials. In general, the entire White House Staff, including the National Security Advisor and his staff, will change. At the Pentagon, State Department and other Executive Departments, the new president will appoint fresh faces to the positions of assistant secretary and higher. Some deputy assistant secretaries and ambassadors will also rotate.

Most of the new appointees will be experienced foreign policy professionals. However, most of them will be unfamiliar with Georgia and Georgian issues. That means that Georgian officials and diplomats must gear up to meet the new American officials and acquaint them with Georgia.

It is important to do this right away because new administrations typically undertake a thorough foreign policy review at the outset of their term. It is the best way to take full stock of America’s massive foreign policy agenda, educate the new officials and renew or develop new policy directions. Expect the foreign policy review of early 2009 to be thorough, as the new president seeks to differentiate him or herself from Bush. That does not mean that the new administration will change all—or even most—policies. All, however, will be re-examined.

The focus will be on Iraq. No matter the campaign rhetoric of the three candidates, the new president will be searching for the best way to bring US-led Coalition troops home without precipitating a geopolitical disaster. Georgia will have two interests in the outcome. First, there are 2000 Georgian soldiers in Iraq, so any decision in Washington—go, stay, change strategy—will matter to Tbilisi.

Second, how the new president handles Iraq will impact the counter-terrorist activity of all allies, as well as the stability of the region. Georgia has a stake in fighting terrorism and—just 500 kilometers from Iraq—it is very close to a very volatile region.

A review of US and allied strategy in Afghanistan will be close on the heels of the Iraq review. Bluntly put, NATO is losing the war in Afghanistan while many allies appear blithely unaware even that there is a war underway there. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently warned that this situation could lead to a two-tier alliance.
How we work through these challenges to NATO will determine the nature of the alliance Georgia is seeking to join.

Georgia’s top foreign policy objective is to embark upon a NATO MAP as soon as possible and to join the alliance shortly thereafter. Support for Georgia’s aspiration has been a key part of Bush’s democracy agenda. The new administration will review that agenda too.

In reality, spreading democracy has been the American agenda for over six decades, but that effort ebbs and flows, and right now, many perceive that the US is over-extended. There will be an impetus to pull back and a frustration that a big, quick pullback from Iraq will be impossible. The new administration will scrutinize all our commitments, including those to Georgia.

Given the bipartisan support that Georgia enjoys, along with America’s geopolitical interest here, maintaining the status quo will be the presumed outcome of any review.

The best way for Georgia to insure a positive outcome will be to show the new American foreign policy officials a solid record of Georgian democratic development and sustained reforms. Whether Clinton, McCain or Obama, there will be changes, but America and Georgia can and should go forward as the partners they have been.

*The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia.*

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