

THE 2012 U.S. ELECTION

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It will be early November before the U.S. casts ballots to decide who will be President for the next four years. Only one of the major candidates -- Pres. Obama -- is now known and events and arguments in the intervening time could profoundly affect the outcome. However, at this writing, a number of factors seem likely to be influential -- some relate to the President, some to the domestic situation, some to international affairs and some to the major opposition party. What follows are brief discussions of these four matters, each of which is worthy of much more commentary.

The President: Possibly because his campaign for election was so inspirational, Barack Obama has failed to deliver on some of the aspirations of some of his most fervent supporters. Despite having delivered on some and despite having to contend with an obviously intractable opposition party, to them he is at least a partial disappointment. Though he has succeeded on such diverse topics as consumer protection, the service of homosexuals in the military, altering the orientation of numerous government departments and programs, and achieving legislation to re-make the financing and operation of the American health care system, they expected more and sooner. These three years have not closed the prison at Guantanamo, have not brought reform to the immigration system, and have continued programs of government secrecy (among other matters) on which they had invested their hopes for the change he promised.

Given the range of likely major opponents, he can still count on the support and vote of many of them but not on all of the energy and financing he received from them before. However, it is extremely unlikely that shortages of funds will adversely affect his campaign.

A seemingly small but persistent group of voters opposes Mr. Obama because he does not conform to the historical image of an American president. This is likely the root of the continuing questioning of his religious affiliation and whether he was even born in the United States and thus is eligible to hold the office.

Domestic Matters: Persistent high unemployment rates and falling housing prices pre-date the current administration. It argues that they would be worse but for its policies and programs. Whether or not this is true, the fact is that their continuation gives a basis for the contention that new leadership and new policies are needed. Without doubt, millions are suffering and include a disproportionate number of the well educated young people who were among Mr. Obama's strong supporters.

Moreover, the national debt has risen markedly in the last three years. The effects that high debt levels in other countries have precipitated has been used to attack the administration. It has failed to respond (and perhaps even understand) the fallacy in this comparison.

Another trend that pre-dates this administration but that leads to domestic disquietude is the erosion of the American middle class. Income distribution is becoming increasingly unequal, poverty has increased and upward class mobility has decreased. None of these encourage support for the current administration but none has, as yet, become a focus for the opposition and is unlikely to be among its arguments. In fact, in the early campaigning, any mention of class or a seeming allusion to it has been attacked by those who would oppose the President.

The continuing inability of Congress to deal with a host of subjects and the accompanying nastiness has further eroded the already low regard with which it, and government in general, are held. How this will affect the results in November is unknowable but among the possibilities is low voter participation in the election and support for a candidate who argues for a diminution in the role of government in the society.

International Matters: Those who supported the election of the President because of their opposition to the wars in which the U.S. was engaged are likely to feel their confidence was justified. The end of a combat role in Iraq, the promised end in Afghanistan and the relatively low level of involvement in the military effort in Libya have not been a significant focus, thus far, of mobilization efforts against him. Laments about what is seen as a diminished U.S. role in the world are a standard in the speeches of most of those who would oppose him but these do not seem to be particularly potent with the public.

Even less potent so far, in fact virtually absent, has been emphasis on Obama's early and failed initiatives to engage with international opponents, to make significant progress on nuclear proliferation and controls, and to resolve issues between Israel and the Palestinians. Nor has the ambiguous and belated response to the Arab spring brought attacks. It is likely, however, that the inability to find effective means of dealing with Iran and North Korea will join the failure of the approach in the Holy Land as bases for criticism. It is unclear how influential that criticism may be as voters make their choice. Thus far, international matters have not been central to the arguments of any of those seeking to replace Obama.

The Opposition: The principal opposition party, the Republicans, have displayed deep internal divisions. They loosely divide into three groups – those most concerned with economic issues, such as the national debt and what they see as antagonism toward capitalism; those most concerned with social issues, such as abortion and single sex marriage; and those

most concerned about what they view as excessive roles for government in personal, domestic and international matters. Of course, individuals may espouse two or even all these views but there are clear divisions among groups in their emphasis. Aspirants for the party's nomination try to broaden their appeal to encompass at least two of the groups but the initial allegiance of each person is clear. Attempts to woo a broader cross-section of Republicans has led to considerable skepticism about their commitments and beliefs. It is consequently unclear how fragmented a party Obama will be facing, no matter who gets the party's endorsement. In fact, there is some talk already about a "third party" entering a candidate.

These schisms are likely to be of particular concern to the present leader in the campaign for the Republican nomination. Mitt Romney has trouble convincing conservatives of all stripes how steadfast and conservative he actually is. His opponents are providing fodder for an Obama campaign against him should he get the nomination.

At this time, only the bare outlines of Obama's campaign are visible. The arguments of his opponents have been better articulated and it will be only in the coming months that their response, and the public's response, to his arguments will be known.