

U.S. ELECTIONS – 2010

Monroe Newman

Professor Emeritus of Economics, Pennsylvania State University

The United States is governed through a highly complex system of elections that fills literally thousands and thousands of elective offices (some of which are unpaid) at the local, county, state and national levels. From abroad, attention tends to focus on 536 of these offices – that of president, who serves no more than two 4 year terms, 100 senators (two from each state) who serve 6 year terms and 435 members of the House of Representatives (at least one of whom comes from each state) who serve 2 year terms. This year is an “off-year” since there is no presidential contest but all the seats in the House and a third of the seats in the Senate are being contested.

On Election Day, the second Tuesday in November, a multitude of local, county, and state posts will be filled as well. The outcomes of the elections for national office are inevitably colored by the issues and arguments featured in these non-national contests. Their importance in determining outcomes of House and Senate races has led a wise and seasoned observer and participant to conclude that “all elections are local.” To the extent that this is true, understanding the arguments and outcomes in national races is even harder for observers abroad.

Complicating understanding even further is the role of the two dominant political parties. Historically, both have portrayed themselves as a “big tent,” meaning that members could hold a wide range of views and not necessarily adhere to all or even most of the positions espoused in the party’s platforms. Each tries to portray itself as representative of the “center” of political thought and each argues the other is “out of the mainstream.” One result of this is that some members of the two parties may hold views that are more similar to each other than to views held by other members of their own party. As one might guess, party discipline has frequently been hard to enforce, especially since most candidates raise their own funds and do not rely on their party to support their campaign financially.

Traditionally, the party of the president loses House and Senate seats in an “off-year” election. His (the president has yet to be a her) performance, achievements, programs, unrelated events and miscues provide targets for the opposition. Traditionally too, “off-year” elections tend to be focused on domestic issues. Despite what those abroad might hope, this year’s campaigns will sometimes barely mention foreign policy or foreign wars.

The domestic issues that seem to dominate relate to one of the President’s signal achievements, the passage this year of a national health care insurance program and to various aspects of the national economy.

The first and relatively minor legislated provisions affecting health care insurance took effect in September. Despite the absence of any untoward consequences, the fear that dire results lie ahead so dominates opposition to this new law that it has led to a Republican pledge to repeal it in its entirety even before it takes full effect in 2014. Even were they to secure passage of such an act, it would be subject to a presidential veto so unless there is a different president elected in 2012, the law will stand. But it is a major campaign theme.

Within a host of issues related to the national economy, four themes currently dominate – the budgetary deficit, avoiding income tax increases, the assistance given to financial and non-financial businesses, and the persistence of unemployment despite fiscal and monetary stimulus programs. Other economic issues, such as the growing inequality in income distribution, will apparently go unremarked.

Contenders from both parties flail and rail at the deficit, blame each other and avoid reasonable discussion. They produce heat without light and offer alternatives without content. If one of the purposes of political campaigns is to enhance public awareness and understanding, for example of the special circumstances of the dollar in the world, it is not happening

Income tax reductions enacted under President Bush expire at the end of the year and unless extended, virtually all taxpayers will see their obligations rise. President Obama has proposed that the increase affect only those families making more than \$250,000 in taxable income. Republicans want them exempt from the increase too.

Despite the fact that the initial “bailouts” of businesses were proposed and enacted during President Bush’s time in office, Republicans are trying to capitalize on the widespread distaste for making public assistance available to “Wall Street” and the major auto companies. It is sometimes an awkward argument for the Republicans to make but the distaste is there and they are apparently willing to accept the awkwardness to get the convenience.

Given the persistence of high unemployment and continuing foreclosures on homes, the Obama administration clearly over-promised on the speed and efficacy of the stimulus program enacted in its early days. Whatever the validity of its contention that matters would have been much worse without it, blame for hard times falls on those in office and feeds the tendency to seek change by replacing elected officials.

Polls and pundits agree that the Democrats will suffer losses but all is not contentment within the Republican Party. The so-called Tea Party movement is moving the party decidedly to the right on economic matters, among others. Moderate Republicans are being given a hard time within the party or even leaving its tent. Disaffection also exists among the social conservatives in the party, those who want it to emphasize such issues as opposition to abortion or same-sex marriage rather than the matters that energize Tea Partiers.

Some states allow early voting before the official Election Day so the die is already being cast. What will it say? Stay tuned in.