Why Obama Could Win and Why He Probably Won't

November 28, 2011

G. Terry Madonna & Michael L. Young

As the 2012 presidential election looms ever closer, two hard facts confront American politics. The first is that Barack Obama—despite enormous obstacles—could still win next year’s presidential election. The second is that he probably won’t. Both of these propositions deserve close scrutiny.

Arguing that Obama could still win flies in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary. Both the president’s approval rating and his critical “re-elect” numbers are in the low- to mid-40% range. No president in modern times has ever won re-election with such low public approval. Furthermore, there’s little reason to think his numbers will dramatically improve between now and next November. Equally ominous, Obama’s low popularity reflects America’s still struggling economy and stubbornly high unemployment. No president since Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 has been re-elected against the backdrop of such dismal economic conditions. And even in Roosevelt’s troubled times, unemployment had actually dropped during his first term, not risen, as has been the case during Obama’s first term. Given these indisputable facts, it would seem that Obama’s re-election chances are dubious at best.

But they are not, largely because American presidential elections are much more than a simple popularity contest between opposing candidates and competing philosophies. Indeed, history suggests and most political scientists agree that presidential elections are properly understood as a two-step national referendum on the incumbent and his challenger. In the first phase, the electorate decides thumbs up or thumbs down whether it will give the incumbent another term. If the electorate renders thumbs down, the second phase of the referendum is triggered. In it the electorate seeks a challenger who is an acceptable alternative to the rejected incumbent.

This vital contingency, the search for an acceptable alternative to the incumbent, explains why we now have a tight national election when by historical standards Republicans should be on their way to a landslide victory.

The electorate has already decided, largely on the basis of poor economic growth and jobs, that Obama should not have a second term. But the second critical referendum step remains unresolved. If in the end the GOP does not nominate an acceptable alternative, the American electorate next November will hold its collective nose and vote Obama a second term. Thus, which candidate the Republicans finally nominate along with the condition of the economy are the factors likely to determine the election’s outcome.

This inevitably sets up four possible scenarios, one favorable to Obama, one favorable to Republicans, and two more with uncertain effects on the race: (1) a declining or stagnant economy and Republicans nominate an acceptable alternative; (2) a declining or stagnant economy and Republicans nominate an unacceptable alternative; (3) an improving economy and Republicans nominate an acceptable alternative; or (4) an improving economy and Republicans nominate an unacceptable alternative.

Scenario one (bad economy, acceptable challenger) all but guarantees a GOP victory. Scenario four
(improving economy, unacceptable challenger) does the same for Obama. But scenario two (bad economy, unacceptable challenger) and scenario three (improving economy, acceptable challenger) may favor either party.

What if anything may either campaign do at this point to influence events, given these fundamental forces now in play?

For Obama there seems little to do beyond squeezing as much improvement out of the economy as he can while making the case that his opponent has no plan to make things better. To win he must be lucky in the GOP candidate he ultimately faces. Republicans, on the other hand, do control their own fate. They have to nominate a candidate that will appeal to sufficient moderates and independents in the critical battleground states to win the magical 270 electoral votes.

Do Republicans have such a candidate running for the nomination? The question allows no unqualified answer. However, on the basis of numerous head-to-head trial run polls measuring Obama versus various GOP aspirants, there seems at least one Republican, Mitt Romney, who is an acceptable alternative to most voters. There may be others, but clearly voters consider at least Romney to be a viable candidate.

Also auspicious for Republicans is their historical tendency to forge consensus from chaos and unity from disunity after deeply divisive nomination contests. The turmoil now raging within the GOP may be a distant memory when they gather for their nominating convention in Tampa next August.

That said, however, it must be acknowledged that the GOP contest underway is far from over. During 2011, five separate candidates have at least briefly led in trial heat polls. At one point there was a statistical tie between four different candidates (Paul, Cain, Gingrich, and Romney), and the active field now still numbers eight candidates approaching the early caucuses and primaries.

From the perspective of late 2011, the outcome of next year’s presidential contest is still in doubt. While Obama no longer controls his fate, Republicans still must act to control their own. At this point, it is still not certain they will.

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly, and previous columns can be viewed at http://politics.fandm.edu. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2011 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.