America's Forensic Election

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Regular elections determine who represents us in our representative democracy. But some exceptional elections do much more. These “forensic elections”—for that’s what they are—hold an electoral stethoscope against our body politic, gauge our civic vital signs, and offer both diagnosis and prognosis for any political malaise we may be experiencing.

We had a forensic election on November 2nd. And the lessons it taught about contemporary American politics promise to resonate loudly over the next two years in the run-up to the 2012 election.

Here’s our short list of five of them whose shelf life easily reaches November 2012.

1. **The Economy Is THE Issue:** Bush got it too late. Obama didn’t get it at all. And so voters in 2010 found themselves again sending a message they thought had been sent before: fix the economy and produce jobs.

   The primacy of the economic issue in recent times is perhaps unrivalled in its intensity. Not surprisingly, candidates this year focused almost exclusively on the economy and jobs, suggesting that the political establishment has gotten the message at last.

   Nevertheless, how the new Congress and the president approach the jobs issue—and their success in handling it—is likely more than any other factor to determine the outcome of the 2012 presidential election. Voters expect action on job development. And if they don’t get it, the voter wrath of 2010 will become the voter rage of 2012.

2. **“Change” Has Become the Unchanging Impulse in American Politics:** This is now the third consecutive election in which voters rejected the status quo. These three “wave” elections have all been about change. First, in 2006, it was opposition to the Iraq war. Then, in 2008, anxiety about the economy produced a second wave. Finally, in 2010, came a stunning rejection of Obama’s recession policies.

   This is no passing phase in our politics. For almost a decade, voters consistently have indicated that the country has been moving in the wrong direction. Currently two thirds of the nation holds that view. Moreover, voters overwhelmingly give unfavorable job evaluations to Congress, the president, and the political parties. Voters want change in Washington. This change motif has become the political zeitgeist of our times.

3. **The “Politics of Subtraction” Is Real and Lasting:** Explosive federal spending under both Bush and Obama has crystallized political opposition to larger deficits and increased spending. The Tea Party movement is grounded in the notion of cutting spending and reducing the role of government, and a solid plurality of ordinary Americans agree. In poll after poll over the past two years, reducing the federal deficit and paring down national debt have consistently ranked among the top five problems facing the nation.
The politics of subtraction inevitably will produce that perfect storm of political pain: the need to raise taxes while reducing benefits. Congress is likely to confront that nasty reality when it tackles the emerging Medicare and Social Security crisis.

4. The Center Continues to Disappear from American Politics: Moderates or centrists have become about as trendy in American politics as pegged pants and hula-hoops. To compromise may be human, but to polarize has become divine.

This election has materially accelerated the trend to obliterating centrist influence in Congress. For Democrats, the loss on Tuesday of many of the 54 mostly moderate “Blue Dog” Democrats, along with retirees, will leave their party even more sharply liberal. On the GOP side, the addition of Tea Party Republicans will make the congressional Republicans ever more conservative.

Moderates and centrists are increasingly missing from both parties. This lack of a middle in American politics makes agreement on critical issues, such as entitlement reform and tax policy, difficult if not impossible. Incredibly, another shutdown of the federal government such as happened in 1995 cannot be ruled out.

5. Divided Government Becomes Deadlocked Government: Washington next January will be described in many ways. One appellation that will not be applied, however, is “one big happy family.” At least not unless one thinks of the Hatfields and McCoys that way. The Congress that convenes in January will be one of the most unruly, polarized, and politicized Congresses in modern history. Congressional Republicans will be pulled to the right even more by Tea Party activists who have already warned party leaders that compromise on spending, taxes, and regulation will not be tolerated. On the Democratic side of the aisle will be a solid phalanx of liberal Democrats that have been carping for months that Obama surrendered the liberal agenda by not pushing vigorously all of his 2008 reform promises.

The practical consequence is likely to be ever increasing incivility amid legislative deadlock on almost every important issue, putting in doubt the future of the Obama presidency and his ambitious agenda.

Closing the books on 2010, we move from one critical election to the next critical election in 2012. Indeed, since at least 2002 we have had a series of these pivotal elections. Nor does it seem we are done with them. Beyond doubt, we are in the midst of a turbulent transition in national politics as we move from the relative stability of the late 20th century to the relative instability of the early 21st.

Meanwhile the 2012 presidential election looms, an election that seems more and more likely to be remembered as one of the defining elections in American history.

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