

How This Election Will Keep Us Polarized

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The presidential election is less than five months away and is shaping up to be among the most predictable in American history. Once the noise around new technologies, Tea Parties and Romney's extraordinary wealth is stripped away, it is not difficult to understand this race as being between a Democratic incumbent and Republican challenger, both of whom faced either no, or only nominal, opposition in their efforts to win their party's nomination. Moreover, both of these candidates have positions and even ideology that is comfortably in the mainstream of their parties' of the last half century or so.

Even though the current polls probably slightly favor Obama, we cannot yet know for certain who will win. However, we know that this election will, in one key respect, look a lot like each of the last three presidential elections. Like the elections of 2000, 2004 and 2008, this election will be very close, reflecting the highly polarized political environment in the U.S. This is the fourth election in a row in which most of the electorate has made its mind up well in advance and which will be decided by a very small margin in a very small handful of states.

Consistently close elections reflect both a polarized electorate and a failure by government to either solve major problems or to successfully build new coalitions. To a meaningful extent, the U.S. will be having the same presidential election for the fourth time in a row this November. With only minor variation, the issues, coalitions and positions of the candidates of the parties have been the same throughout this period. This is true despite the economic downturn of 2008 which, as is now clear, had an enormous economic impact, but politically did little other than harden the economic views on both the left and the right.

Because of this degree of polarization and, more importantly, the extent to which current partisan positioning simply reinforces this polarization, it is unrealistic to expect this, or any, election to resolve anything either with regards to breaking this political deadlock or to leading to policies that will successfully address the myriad problems facing the country. Regardless of who wins this election, the issues and coalitions will remain the same going forward, which means that, barring something extremely unforeseen -- even more unforeseen than the global economic downturn or 9/11 -- the 2016 election will look a lot like this one. Voters will continue to be polarized around social issues and economic ideology and will apply those frames to understanding any new issue that arises.

If Barack Obama, who came to office after a ground-breaking campaign offering a radically different vision than his predecessor and who inspired hope in a way rarely seen in politics, was unable to break this deadlock in his first term, it is hard to imagine how a second Obama term, or a Romney presidency, which will be uninspiring and cautious before it even begins, could possibly change this. Thus, the expectation that anything will change after November is not realistic. Instead, regardless of the outcome, especially given the strong likelihood that neither party will win both houses of congress and the presidency, it is likely that the transition from election season to governance by bitter partisan feuding will be even smoother than it was in 2009.

Ultimately, demographics, not political persuasion, may change this situation. If things do not change, age replacement could weaken support for the right wing positions on social issues such as marriage equality. The increasing racial diversity of the country will not be good for the Republican party, which remains overwhelmingly white. Demographic inevitability is an appealing argument for Democrats because it suggests that, ultimately, they will win, but there are never any guarantees in politics. It is, for example, easy, if a little frightening, to imagine a scenario in which several more years of bad economic times leads not to a generation of more tolerant young people, but to a generation of chronically unemployed young people looking for scapegoats and being very open to appeals based on intolerance or Christian fundamentalism. This would, of course, further the deadlock or tip the balance to the right.

A sustained polarized deadlock of the electorate creates a political dynamic that is hard to sustain and potentially explosive. Because both sides are almost equal in size and certainty that they are right, elections will not reduce tension and will likely just further escalate hostile rhetoric from both sides. The losers of a close election do not lose confidence in their ideas, they just believe they need to fight a little harder the next time. This is, in some respects, an admirable sentiment, but one that will not lead to significant political change. There is obviously a lot at stake in this election, as there is in every election, but in a big-picture way, it is not likely to change anything.