

Après L'Election

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The November election will be crucial to the future of the Barack Obama presidency and, of course, the country more generally. In some respects, the Obama presidency, still less than two years old, has been characterized by more tests of this nature than most. First there was the stimulus bill, which Obama needed to pass to prove that he could govern. Then there was the fight for the Massachusetts senate seat that had been held by the late Ted Kennedy for almost half a century. The president and his party failed that test as that seat went to a Republican for the first time in most of our memories. Obama then recovered somewhat with the passage of the health care bill, which, while a relatively moderate pro-health insurance industry bill, at least demonstrated the president's continued relevance on domestic affairs as well as his ability to go up against the Republicans and win.

The midterm election will not be one last chance for the Obama presidency to recommit itself to a genuinely progressive agenda. There is almost nothing in the record of this administration to suggest that is still possible at all. This is a centrist administration which, ironically, has approached governance largely out of fear of angering powerful constituencies while engendering more rancor than any administration in recent decades. That is unlikely to change after November.

Nor is the midterm election crucial because different possible results will lead to radically different policy outcomes. The range of possible election outcomes is sufficiently narrow that it is already clear what might happen. Although Republican gains in both houses of congress are almost inevitable, nobody other than the most extreme right wing ideologues really expects a Republican landslide. It is possible that the Republicans will win narrow control of both the house and senate, but it remains possible that the Democrats will narrowly retain control of both houses or that one party will control the house and the other will control the senate.

In either case, there will be partisan fighting making it extremely difficult for Obama to pass any legislation or indeed to do much of anything. In this sense the election will prolong rather than resolve the current political situation. The difference between nominal Democratic control of one or both houses of congress and solid, but narrow, Republican control of congress, which are the only real possibilities, has more bearing on spin than on legislation. Either way, not much will get done.

Because the outcome is likely to be close but not all that important for legislative issues, questions of spin, interpretation, expectations and positioning are what now make this election important. It is all but certain that both sides will claim victory on November 3rd, the Democrats because they will have limited the damage and the Republicans because they will have handed Obama an unequivocal defeat.

If the Republican narrative prevails, that party will be more emboldened, continue to push the country and its social fabric to the breaking point and see no reason to tamp down the divisive rhetoric of the last few years. While the Republicans can generally be depended upon to overplay their hand, thus making it likely that this will ultimately help Obama get reelected, the long term damage to our polity could be quite real and substantial.

If, however, the Democratic narrative prevails, regardless of the outcome of the election, it will begin to look like the Beck-Palin right wing movement has peaked and thoughtful Republicans, and there must be some left, will begin to push the party back in a more moderate, or at least civil, direction.

The challenge for the Obama administration and the Democratic Party is to thread the needle between keeping expectations low while not being so gloomy that voters give up and don't bother to vote, thus making it easier to limit Republican gains and spin the election as a victory. The Democrats are getting some assistance in this regard from the Republican Party leadership, which seems to be committed to raising expectations about their imminent victory that may just turn out to be unrealistic.

The Obama administration will also be faced with a limited range of options after November. Redoubling their commitment to progressive change will not be on the table. It is more likely that the administration will have to choose between triangulating and working with the Republicans, who will have considerably more power in Washington after the election, or position itself as the last remaining voice of reason keeping the right wing extremists at bay. Although there is little reason to be certain that Obama will lean in the latter direction, that is clearly the best option for the president and our country.