

Will We Have Another Election With No Discussion of Jobs?

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The financial crisis, which led to the recession from which the U.S. still has not recovered, began after the 2008 presidential campaign was well underway. Some have asserted that the economic crisis played a key role in President Barack Obama's election. This is something of an overstatement. While the crisis, and the recession that followed, helped the challenger, Obama was the clear frontrunner by late summer of 2008. Other than John McCain's surreal and brief suspension of his campaign allegedly to devote his attention to the crumbling economy, the recession played a relatively small role in the 2008 election as much of the storylines around the two candidates, such as the historic nature of Obama's campaign and the widespread frustration with the Bush administration, had been established by the time the economy took its sharpest downward turn.

President Obama took office at a time when addressing the problems caused by the recession was the paramount issue facing the American people, after running a campaign that for the most part was focused on a nebulous notion of change. Perplexingly, much of the attention paid to the fallout of the economic crisis was oriented around the finance sector, rather than on jobs, which was, for many American citizens, the biggest issue facing their communities following the economic crisis.

Jobs were, therefore, not a major focus of the 2008 campaign, but given the relatively high, and stable, unemployment numbers since Obama took office, one might expect jobs to be a major part of the 2012 campaign. As the 2012 election approaches, however, is it becoming very likely that another presidential election will occur without a strong emphasis on jobs. This is quite extraordinary given the relatively high unemployment rates and widespread concern over jobs and joblessness.

It is obviously in the interest of the American people for jobs to be at the center of the upcoming presidential election. If both candidates, and parties, focused on job creation during the campaign, offering competing visions to address the issue of job creation, than the issue that dominates the lives and outlook of many Americans would get the attention it deserves. A campaign in which joblessness is viewed as a central problem that needs to be addressed is not likely because, while it may be what the people want and need, it does not help either of the major parties, or their likely, and in the case of the Democrats, all but certain, nominees.

If the economy turns around and starts adding jobs in substantial numbers, pushing the unemployment rate below 6 percent for the first time since before the economic crisis began in earnest, President Obama will be able to tout a tremendous success story and will be reelected easily. This, however, is extremely unlikely to occur. It is far more likely that the unemployment rate will remain at or around 9 percent, as it has for most of Obama's presidency. In that scenario, Obama will have almost no incentive to emphasize jobs in his campaign because the emphasis

would do little more than underscore Obama's inability to solve this extremely pressing problem during his first term.

Obama's incentive for campaigning on issues other than job development, barring a genuine economic recovery, is clear and not unreasonable. The Republicans are likely to focus on issues other than jobs for a different set of reasons. For the Republicans, the economic crisis and the recession that followed was never really seen as being primarily about jobs, unemployment or the economic grievances facing ordinary people in the U.S. Instead, Republicans saw the recession as yet another example of the problems of big government and made deficits, rather than jobs their primary concern.

The Republican job creation strategy in 2012 will likely be the same as what it has been for most of the last several decades -- more tax cuts for the richest Americans. This, according to Republican dogma, will lead to businesses magically creating more jobs. It is not clear that even most Republican candidates believe this anymore, but because there has never really been an alternate Republican job creation plan, it is likely that the party's candidate will simply focus on other issues, like the debt and creeping socialism.

The likely absence of any meaningful, or even less than meaningful, discussions of jobs and job creation during an election that will probably occur in the middle of a prolonged period of widespread unemployment is a good indicator of the problems of the political system and of the disconnect between political elites and the citizens they claim, or seek, to represent. It also suggests that, at least at the elite level, there is a growing acceptance of widespread unemployment, as few believe anything can be done to bring these jobs back. This might be the worst election news of all for the American people.