

Rethinking the American Electorate after an Obama Victory

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We are on the cusp of a very special moment in the US. Barring extremely unusual or dramatically unforeseen circumstances, we are less than two weeks away from a great day for the United States as we definitively close the book on the dishonesty, incompetence, belligerence and ignorance which has characterized the Bush administration. Election Day will not just mean the end of almost a decade of dysfunctional Republican governance, but will also show that Americans are ready and anxious for progressive and thoughtful leadership.

November 4th will also be a great day for democracy as millions of people will join together and through the simple act of voting change their country and the world unequivocally and for the better. The world has rarely seen the people of any democracy rise up peacefully and send such a clear message. All those who don't believe that democracy can work or that voters are only driven by their baser instincts will have to wrestle with the message the people of our country will send on Election Day.

It ain't, as the famous American philosopher Lawrence Berra would say, over until its over, but if I may continue the baseball allusion, we are now up by a few runs with one out in the 9th and have Mariano Rivera on the mound. I recognize that, even the great Rivera blows a save every now and then and then in order to ensure victory we all have to continue to work, volunteer and, of course, vote, but having said that, I am going to address some of the often overlooked issues which an Obama victory would raise.

One of the great things about an Obama victory is that it will force a lot of people to rethink a lot of things. People outside the US who have bought into the appealingly reductive anti-Americanism rhetoric of recent years, will have to rethink some of their basic assumptions about our country. This will be particularly true among those on the European left who may want to stop and ask themselves what it tells them about the US, and their own countries, that somebody like Barack Obama will be our leader. Others in Europe and elsewhere who perhaps pay less attention to the US will have to rethink their view of the US as a conservative country which likes to elect cowboys and bubbas, as we have in recent years.

Right wingers in the US will have to revisit their assumptions about the inherent racism and conservatism of the American people as well as the power of wedge issues to divide people and lead them to vote on their fears. Emphasizing bizarre issues such as Obama's acquaintance with Bill Ayers, or calling Obama a socialist because of his notion that tax policy should not simply redistribute wealth upwards, failed to influence more than a few voter this time. This should suggest to the operatives of the right wing that they their cynical understanding of America can be trumped by a more affirming and progressive sentiment in the electorate.

It is, however, the American left which will have to do the most intriguing and challenging rethinking of basic assumptions when Obama wins. For years now a central piece of the progressive worldview is that progressives are enlightened Americans in a sea of their ignorant, bigoted and narrow-minded compatriots. If you don't believe my assertion, see how many times in the comments section of a progressive blog, Americans voters are referred to as ignorant or uninformed, or eavesdrop at any progressive coffee shop or other hangout. Opposition to progressive causes is often explained away by saying that Americans are bigots, or somehow stupid. This demonstrates an ugly contempt for voters, and in fact for democracy, that should have no place in progressive politics.

Nonetheless, this feeling of specialness is a central part of progressive identity for many. For example, the tone often used to express disbelief that Obama could win, particularly early in this campaign, was often a mixture of anger with racism and a sense of self-righteousness from the speaker for being above that racism.

November 4th will almost certainly show these beliefs to be the nonsense that they are. After November 4th, whenever somebody belittles the intelligence or tolerance of the American voter the proper response will be "What about when we elected Barack Obama?" I hope for many this will be understood to be a sign that American voters can be more progressive, enlightened and thoughtful than had previously been believed. Obama will win because willingness to vote for somebody who looks different, and whose name sounds unusual, simply because he is the best candidate, is no longer the province of elites or an educated minority. This may cause progressives to rethink much of what they thought they knew about America, but it seems a small price to pay for an Obama presidency.