

The 2012 Election and U.S. Democracy

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Fidel Castro, who has not had much experience with political competition of any kind has referred to the Republican primary campaign as a “competition of idiocy and ignorance.” Sadly, the longtime Cuban leader has a point. The race to the intellectual bottom and the loutish demonstrations of intolerance which have characterized the Republican race for the presidential nomination has been entertaining but also disturbing. Four years ago, the world saw the American political process at its best as the American people peacefully turned the page on the disastrous Bush administration and elected a new and very different president. The race this year, at least on the surface, is very different, but there are still elements of the campaign which demonstrate the strength and resilience of democratic systems of governance.

In 2008 Barack Obama captured the idealism and hope of people both inside and outside the U.S. in an election that renewed people’s faith in democracy and in America. None of the candidates this year, including President Obama who is, of course, seeking reelection, is inspiring very much idealism and hope. Moreover, for much of the Republican primary period, the dialog, particularly on foreign policy, has felt like a competition to see who could produce the most jingoistic bluster. That phase seems to have receded as the race has narrowed to two serious candidates and two others.

There are, nonetheless, reasons why this election, as depressing as it has been for some, also demonstrates the strength and value of democracy. First, after a three or so year period of increasingly heated rhetoric and personal attacks on the president, the need to win votes has, surprisingly, tempered some of this rhetoric. The most confrontational, angry and intolerant candidates have fallen by the wayside. The exception to this is Rick Santorum, who is about as intolerant as any major figure in American politics, and is also about ten days away from seeing the end of his political career and returning to his richly deserved Google infamy. Overall, the election has, perhaps surprisingly, acted as a moderating force for the Republican candidates. Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney, the two leading candidates, have had to moderate their rhetoric as the election has moved from small states to bigger ones. This will continue as the general election approaches.

Second, while the Republican primary has at times felt like a political reality television show with several candidates that are demonstrably unqualified to run a grocery store, let alone a country, and who have expressed a hatred and contempt for the current President that borders on pathological, the campaign has proceeded as planned. In the American context, this seems completely normal, but in other countries it is easy to imagine candidates as axiomatically unqualified as Herman Cain being kept off the ballot, or candidates as committed to the destruction of the president as Rick Perry or Michele Bachmann portrayed as treasonous and pushed out of politics. It seems obvious, but the inclusion of these types of radical candidates is evidence of the strength of the American system, while their demise is evidence that the best solutions to problems of democracy is often more democracy.

A central aspect of democracy is that voters must be allowed to make mistakes. While the American people do not need to make a mistake on the scale of, for example electing Newt Gingrich President, to demonstrate this to the rest of the world, the campaign to this point has shown that the American system allows for mistakes to happen. Recent history has also show that the key to ameliorating the impact of these mistakes is to keep institution such as free press and regular elections strong.

It is easy to see the strengths of a democratic system when inspiring or otherwise extraordinary candidates win elections, but this is not likely to happen in the U.S. in 2012. The most likely outcome is that the president, who is no longer the extraordinary persona he was in 2012, will be reelected, but it is possible that Mitt Romney, an even less inspiring politician, will unseat President Obama. Accordingly, the world will not see the American system give rise to an inspiring candidate or even an inspiring narrative this year. Instead, the U.S. election, which has already, given a stage to a handful of narrow-minded candidates seemingly unaware of most of the rest of the world, will likely produce an ugly race between two deeply imperfect figures. This too is part of the story, even the strength, of democracy. Democracy sometimes produces mediocrity or worse, but the process is nonetheless significant. The ability to endure and keep the country relatively peaceful even when many of the politicians themselves are not up to the task is also democracy's strength. This is the lesson from the U.S. in 2012.