

# I'm In, But Without Any Enthusiasm

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: April 5, 2011 3:29 PM

On Monday morning President Obama announced his reelection bid. Obama will have a tough race against whoever wins the Republican nomination, but it is not difficult to see how with a few breaks, and by avoiding any enormous mistakes, the president can get reelected. It is also clear that Obama will face no significant opposition in his bid for the Democratic Party's nomination. While Obama has disappointed many, he is still strong enough to soundly defeat any possible challenger in his own party.

While the good news for Democrats is that Obama may be in a relatively strong position to get reelected, the bad news for progressives is that Obama is now clearly just another Democrat with little real ability to inspire or bring about real change. The reasons to vote for Obama are clear: He will make better appointments to the Supreme Court than a Republican president would; he will stand up to the most extreme and dangerous proposals from a John Boehner-led House of Representatives and a U.S., Senate which could be taken over by the Republicans in 2012 or 2014; and he will pay more attention to issues regarding the environment, civil rights and organized labor, although will probably not really fight for any of this. There are, of course, other reasons as well, but the basic point remains that we need to vote for the guy who is disappointing and uninspiring because the other options are worse.

The excitement that surrounded Obama's election, and his entire campaign in 2008, will have all but entirely dissipated by the time this election occurs. After a brief moment of hope when progressive Democrats believed that with Obama in the White House and the Democrats controlling both houses of Congress, they had a chance of making real change, Democrats are now back to supporting their candidate because the alternative is simply awful and frightening.

The enthusiasm gap between 2008 and 2012 should, at this time, be a concern for the Obama campaign. The volunteers and small donors who flocked to Obama's campaign in 2008 are unlikely to feel a similar excitement, at least initially, in the 2012 election cycle, but as the election approaches, it is possible that many of these supporters will come back, if only out of fear of a Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Mike Huckabee or other Republican presidency. These people may vote for different reasons and with a different kind of energy, but most of them will vote.

Obama's reelection campaign, like most reelection campaigns, will not be driven by hope and visions of the future but by fear of the opposition and the incumbent's record. Accordingly, instead of a campaign, like the one in 2008 that dared Americans to dream of real change, the 2012 campaign will seek to tell a story of economic turnaround and

recovery. Although it is far from obvious now that this has occurred, it is certainly possible that there will be a noticeable improvement in the economy of 2012.

Reelection campaigns are also usually characterized by limited political dialogue as critics from within the president's own party are encouraged by the party leadership to tone down their criticism because of the urgency of the election. The Obama administration will likely try to take credit for a largely unimpressive health care reform bill, keep their coziness with Wall Street under wraps and downplay the similarities between the Obama and Bush foreign policies. These things, however, must not be forgotten even by those of us who will vote for Obama again in 2012.

The 2012 election is important, with a great deal at stake, but it is not characterized by a sense of urgency, excitement or hope. This reflects the extraordinary and uninspiring trajectory of Barack Obama over the last four years. After evolving from charismatic young senator to viable presidential candidate, he became an international symbol of hope and a vehicle into which millions of people projected their own aspirations and then, of course, president of the United States. Since assuming that role he has transformed into being just another American president, supported by his party despite his many shortcomings, reviled by the political opposition despite his frequent centrist tendencies, and hamstrung by the power of the country's political and financial establishment. In these respects, Obama is similar to Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, Richard Nixon or many other American presidents.

Despite the different tone that will surround Obama's reelection campaign compared to his 2008 campaign, Obama's victory in 2012 remains important for progressives and for the future of our country. This is partially because all presidential elections are important; and the cost to the country of having another eight, or even four, years like those of the Bush administration would be dreadful. In some respects, this is a reflection of the sad, and depressing, state of politics in the U.S., but it is nonetheless true.