

Unexpected and Expected Surprises in the Campaign

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The general election is now less than four months away. The election itself has taken on the predictable rhythm of many presidential elections. The primaries were less contested than usual as the Democratic incumbent had no challengers, not even a protest candidate of some kind; and the Republican challenger did not have any serious opposition throughout much of the race. Not surprisingly, the main issue in the race remains the economy as President Barack Obama is seeking to make the argument that while the economy still has its problems, due to his policies, it is moving in the right direction. Republican challenger Mitt Romney's campaign is arguing that the economy is still in terrible shape and that only the magic of more tax cuts can turn it around.

None of this is unusual and, if nothing else happens, this will likely lead to a narrow, but unambiguous victory for President Obama. Something, however, almost always happens. With four months to go, there are numerous ways the race can be changed. In July of 2008, for example, the financial meltdown had still not occurred. Similarly events such as economic crises, natural disasters, terrorist attacks or other dramatic occurrences could occur at any time and change the nature of the campaign. These types of things are unlikely to occur and almost impossible to foresee in advance. Moreover, it is difficult to know in advance which candidate they will help or hurt.

In addition to the possibility of some dramatic event, there are also some aspects of the campaign which will develop in the next few months which could potentially change the outcome of this election. These include Romney's vice presidential selection, the possibility of a scandal around one of the candidates, a narrative emerging that damages either Romney or Obama or a major gaffe which hurts the candidate among a specific group of voters.

Although most of these things could happen to either Romney or Obama, the risk, at this point is considerably greater for Romney. The most obvious of these is the possibility that Romney's choice for running mate will cause him problems. The precedent for this is significant and, for some reason, is often a bigger problem for Republicans. Two of the last four Republicans who chose a running mate, as opposed to seeking reelection with an existing running mate, during the campaign, created real problems for their campaigns. George H.W. Bush's choice of Dan Quayle in 1988 and John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin in 2008 both dominated the campaign coverage for a few weeks generating a lot of largely negative publicity for the Republican ticket. Bush weathered those bad stories and was able to win. McCain, however, was unable to recover from the reaction to putting Palin on his ticket and lost badly. Vice President Biden is not an ideal running mate either. He is given to verbal gaffes or simply talking too much from time to time, but he is a known quantity. When Romney chooses a running mate he will elevate somebody to the national stage for the first time; and that does not always go smoothly.

Scandals can effect either the incumbent or the challenger, but after four years of Republican efforts to link Obama to scandals, either real or imagined, it is unlikely that Obama will be found enmeshed in a scandal that mobilizes anybody outside of the Republican base. It is apparent by now that many of the Obama related scandals which the right wing has sought to foist on the American people have gotten no traction. Outside of the Republican base few voters seem concerned about the possibility that Obama is not really an American citizen or believe that the Obama administration is rife with corruption.

Romney has been the subject of scrutiny himself during his two bids for the presidency, but not to an extent comparable to the president. If there is an unknown and potentially devastating scandal lurking in one of the candidate's background, it is almost certainly in Romney's. Although the uncertainties and potentially unsettling campaign developments are more likely to damage Romney than Obama, events of that nature that destroy a major party nominee for president during the campaign are nonetheless extremely rare.

The more likely, and more quotidian threat facing Romney is that he might make a good choice for his running mate, and avoid having any scandals from his past dominate the campaign, but he is still vulnerable to being redefined by an aggressive general election campaign. For many voters, Romney is still a relative unknown who can be defined by Obama, while all Romney can do is remind voters of what they already think of Obama. That may be Obama's biggest edge in what is likely to be a very close campaign.