

MORE THAN TEN MONTHS TO GO

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, DEC 26 2011

The US presidential election is more than ten months off and it is going to be, to borrow a phrase from the unloved Donald Rumsfeld, a long, hard slog to get there. President Obama is assured of being nominated by the Democrats for a second term despite some grumblings about his performance within the party. The Republican nominee is yet to emerge from the messy competition that began months ago and seems likely to stretch on for months more. The formal nominating conventions are not until late summer, but the presidential fight is already on even with the Republican unidentified. Both President Obama and the Republicans are in full campaign mode. Little in the way of important legislation will occur until the election.

One of two issues tends to dominate these elections—the economy or foreign policy. Since the Korean War, the Republicans have had the advantage on foreign policy according to public opinion surveys, being trusted most to protect America's international interests. The opposite is the case for the economy where the Democrats usually have the advantage, especially in terms of the willingness to use government spending as a stimulus. The Great Depression lives long in American political memory as an indicator of how little the Republican supposedly care for the economic plight of ordinary citizens.

Although President Obama has had several foreign policy successes, including the killing of Osama bin Laden and the complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the Republicans still hold a now slight advantage in foreign policy. This is the case despite the fact that none of the leading Republican candidates have recognizable foreign policy experience and most espouse a foreign policy as expansive and expensive as that of George W. Bush. The problem for the Republicans is that foreign policy hardly registers today as an important election issue. The Republican presidential candidates, Ron Paul, a Libertarian, being the main exception, take a tough foreign policy line in the hope of capturing a bit of past Republican Imperial glory, faded as it may be by the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and economic hard times which make overseas adventures unwelcome.

The severe recession has eliminated the Democrats' domestic policy advantage. Now the public believes by significant margin that the Republicans are better at managing the economy. The economy is also the most important election issue. But this advantage is surely fragile because the road to long term economic recovery involves restraining popular and largely middle class focused social welfare programs such as Medicare and Social Security. The long electoral process will likely reveal the contradiction between reduced government deficits that Republicans' promise via spending cuts and no tax increases and the sustaining of middle class benefits that most voters will demand. The Democrats promise to protect these very programs and to tax only "the rich." Add the fact that the economy is recovering, if slowly, and the Republican advantage in terms of domestic policy may not hold through the summer.

A good prediction then is that President Obama will win reelection. It will likely be close. It surely will be bitterly fought because there are deep divisions in American society that fall along party lines. But without a significant foreign policy crisis, it is domestic policy fight that I think is shifting back toward an advantage for the Democrats. Americans want their cake and to eat it too. The Republicans are really promising austerity and the Democrats never will.

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About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.