

The Election Campaign and America's Conservative Era

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Global Research, July 14, 2012

14 July 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

This year's presidential campaign is taking place within an extremely conservative era in American political history that will substantially influence the domestic and foreign priorities of the next administration, regardless of whether it's headed by Democrat Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney.

Romney and his party, of course, embrace rigid right wing politics influenced by Tea Party extremism, while Obama and the Democrats — campaign rhetoric aside — basically echo the now extinct “moderate Republicans” of a quarter-century ago in a number of particulars.

A case in point about our decades-long conservative era is the Obama Administration's major “progressive” achievement — the Affordable Care Act (ACA) health insurance plan, which was upheld by the Supreme Court two weeks ago.

The ACA, which congressional Republicans fought furiously to oppose when put forward by President Obama, was devised nearly 20 years ago by the conservative Heritage Foundation and implemented in Massachusetts by Romney when governor in 2006.

In his column in the New York Times June 29, the liberal Keynesian economist Paul Krugman pointed out that the act, which he supports, is “not perfect, by a long shot — it is, after all, originally a Republican plan, devised long ago as a way to forestall the obvious alternative of extending Medicare to cover everyone.”

A page one news analysis in the Times has referred to the measure as “the most significant piece of social legislation since the New Deal,” ignoring Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and the civil rights achievements of the 1960s in order to embellish its significance.

Doubtless, the new health measure contains several important new benefits, as well as several key shortcomings. (For details and analysis of the ACA by Physicians for a National Health Program, see <http://www.pnhp.org/news/2012/june/'health-law-upheld-but-health-needs-still-unmet'-national-doctors-group>.)

Many liberals are now suggesting the ACA — which will still leave over 25 million people without insurance and may deprive millions more poor families of Medicaid as well (thanks to a ruling by arch-conservative Chief Justice John Roberts allowing states to reject enlarging the program) — is a first step toward the development of a truly inclusive national healthcare system. The second step, however, may be decades in coming, if ever, given probable conservative attempts to repeatedly weaken the ACA, much less allow an expansion.

Another of President Obama's major first term "progressive" initiatives was taken from the conservatives as well. This was his proposal for a cap-and-trade system to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere, where they contribute to global warming. This flexible market-based program allowed high greenhouse gas emitters to buy the right to continue polluting the atmosphere from companies with low emissions. Cap-and-trade was a less stringent alternative to tougher regulations sought by environmentalists and it was supported by Republican Presidents Ronald President, George H.W. Bush (who adopted a similar measure in the early 1990s to curb acid rain), and by George W. Bush.

By the time Obama took office, the Republicans had lurched further to the right and corporate interests, led by Big Oil and Dirty Coal, were campaigning passionately against cap and trade. Conservatives scuttled the legislation in the Senate.

In both instances progressive legislation far more appropriate to healthcare and environmental needs was waiting in the wings but Obama — a champion of bipartisanship despite continual humiliating rebuffs — opted for the moderate Republican plans. When cap and trade failed, Obama in effect abandoned the fight against global warming rather than introduce progressive alternatives and fighting for them.

[One of America's best known environmentalists and outspoken climate scientist, James Hansen, head the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, has been leading a campaign against cap-and-trade for several years, charging it "does little to slow global warming or reduce our dependence on fossil fuels." Some groups fighting climate change support the measure as a first step.]

The White House didn't even allow the labor movement's most important legislative request — the Employee Free Choice Act that would have removed roadblocks to union organizing — to come to a vote in the first term when the Democrats controlled both congressional chambers. A probable reason is that Blue Dog conservative Democrats would have voted with the minority to quash the measure.

Today's conservative era is the product of an unrelenting drive for strategic ideological dominance by the right wing and its big business and financial sector allies for almost four decades. It is a reaction to the liberal reforms of the post-World War II era and social advances from the mass popular struggles of the 1960s-early '70s period. As the Republicans moved ever further to the right in the intervening years, so too did the Democrats, now situated in the center right of the political spectrum. This leaves the U.S. as the world's only rich capitalist state without a mass party left of center to at least offer some protection to working families.

The conservative assault accelerated with the implosion of the USSR and the dismantling of most socialist societies two decades ago. The existence of extensive social welfare programs, first in the Soviet Union and then in various socialist countries after World War II, obliged the capitalist "West" to implement reforms lest its own working classes be attracted to "the communist menace." The ending of the Cold War also ended the adoption of significant social programs in America, and the weakening of existing benefits.

Many conservative goals have already been attained since the mid-'70s, and a number of them have taken place with partial or complete support of the Democratic party. They include:

The severe weakening of the labor union movement; the redistribution of massive wealth to the already rich through individual and corporate tax cuts while the standard of living for most Americans is in decline; off-shoring of manufacturing to enhance corporate profits; increased wage exploitation; deregulation of the financial economy, enhancing its casino configuration; privatization of government services; the elimination of social programs for the multitudes; threatened cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security are now “on the table,” says Obama; the fact that about half the American people receive low wages or live in poverty; inaction on needed tax increases for the wealthy; undermining the U.S. educational system; setbacks for civil liberties; and a massive increase in the prison population.

The conservatives made considerable progress during the presidencies of Reagan (1981-89), Bush I (1989-93) and Bush II (2001-2009). But rightist policies also spread during the Democratic administrations of Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and incumbent Obama from 2009.

Clinton’s two principal domestic achievements during eight years in office weakened two key Democratic reforms, much to the delight of the Republicans. In 1996 he conspired with conservatives to dismantle “welfare as we know it” by passing the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” In 1999, Clinton joined forces with the congressional right wing to repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act — a decision that in large part was responsible for the Great Recession and several more years of economic stagnation, unemployment and some six million home foreclosures.

Obama’s first term in office is most noteworthy for his continual concessions to the right wing and refusal to fight for progressive goals, leading his wavering centrist party to the right of center in the process. He demobilized his enthusiastic and massive 2008 constituency upon taking office, evidently because he didn’t want a large activist organization in the streets pushing toward the liberalism many Democratic voters incorrectly believed he embodied.

The conservative campaign for even more control of the political system was signaled by the emergence of the activist right wing populist Tea Party soon after Obama took power. The political impact of this nationwide organization of older white conservatives, libertarians, and the religious right — bankrolled in part by billionaires — has been considerable, not least because no mass activist liberal movement was available to challenge Tea Party activism or put forward a progressive counter-agenda. The liberal rank and file has been isolated by the party leadership, as have liberals in Congress. The few remaining center-left politicians have been objects of criticism from the White House and Democratic big wigs.

The Tea Party added a new element to the decades-long conservative campaign for dominant power in the U.S. Now the GOP isn’t just ideologically driven right wing politicians, their business backers and the wealthy 1% who finance their campaigns, but grass roots activists with their own selfish axes to grind. Some are fuming because their taxes help the “undeserving” poor. Some think immigrants are “freeloaders.” Some are racists who do not accept a black president in the White House. Some will not abide gays and lesbians. Some reject separation of church and state. Some want to subvert the hard-earned rights of American women.

The conservatives rage against “big government” and “wasteful spending,” but this is

demagogic rhetoric convincing or confusing a sector of the electorate largely ignorant of history and the details of current events. Both the Reagan and Bush II administrations — vocal proponents of a smaller state and lower spending — increased the size of government and created huge deficits.

The real Republican objective isn't a "smaller" government per se but a government driven by free market laissez-faire capitalism and entirely controlled by monopoly corporations, Wall Street financiers and the 1% ruling class. In the process, most government regulation of the economy and financial system will be eliminated, social programs will wither along with collective bargaining and the trade union movement, and key services will be transferred to profit-driven corporations.

Since the Affordable Care Act or cap-and-trade are conservative initiatives to begin with, why did congressional Republicans and the entire right wing, including arch opportunist Romney, fight against them?

The conservative movement has gravitated further to the right than it was five years ago, and the Democrats have moved in tandem, perhaps a dozen steps behind and two or three to the left, but quite distant from the domestic liberalism of the 1960s and the 1930s. The last significant social programs took place during conservative Republican President Richard M. Nixon's first term (1969-72) — a product of the still popular though fading liberal era of social reform that he could not ignore. The conservative era began soon afterward.

Experience has taught the Republicans that the modern Democratic Party — particularly during the centrist Clinton and center right Obama incarnations — hastily retreats and offers remarkably big concessions when confronted with obdurate opposition from the right. This is one reason why Republicans have adopted a policy of non-cooperation with Obama and Democrats in Congress. Even when the right wing political resistance doesn't get everything it seeks, it always seems to get something.

For instance, to gain big business and conservative backing for the healthcare act, Obama first rejected the progressive option of a less expensive and far more inclusive universal Medicare (single payer) covering all Americans, then dropped the liberal halfway notion of a "public option" in favor of the Republican plan. He then privately reached agreements with the major pharmaceutical and health insurance companies and hospitals, assuring them of huge profits for many years to come. Lastly he made further concessions to Republicans and Blue Dog Democrats.

The Republican leaders who demonize "Obamacare" are well aware of its limited nature but the absurdly characterized "socialist" ACA will remain a useful conservative target for years to come as long as the opposition party would rather compromise than fight for genuine progressive objectives.

Had President Obama initiated a hard-fought populist educational campaign for single payer, he may have lost the vote but he could have won many additional supporters and tried again and again until victory. Medicare for all has important advantages in addition to covering everyone. Overhead is only 3% compared to about 30% for the profit making insurance companies. Single-payer type health coverage exists in virtually all the leading industrialized capitalist countries of the world but will remain ridiculously overdue in the U.S. until a mass progressive movement or party takes up the challenge. By not daring to struggle, the Democrats don't dare to win.

One of the major conservative strengths, despite various internal factions, is that the Republicans entertain several concrete long range political and ideological goals and are willing to fight for them over the years. And their dishonest, obstructionist politics during Obama's tenure have paid conservative dividends, even at the expense of deepening the nation's economic crisis and further burdening workers and the unemployed by refusing to finance recovery.

The Democrats have no such long range progressive goals — or any serious progressive goals, for that matter — and the party seems to have forgotten how to fight.

Even the staunchly pro-Democratic liberal magazine *The Nation* noted June 25 that aside from populist campaign speeches, Obama “will offer no transformational agenda, no new foundation for an economy that works for working people, no plan for reviving the middle class. And no matter who wins, only sustained popular pressure will forestall a debilitating ‘grand bargain’ that will further undermine the middle class and the poor....

“Americans understand that the system is broken — and rigged against them. They increasingly see both parties as compromised, and they have little sense of an alternative and even less of a sense that anyone is prepared to fight for them. Progressives must therefore be willing to expose the corruption and compromises of both parties. This requires not only detailing the threat posed by the right but honestly about the limits of the current choice.”

These are extremely sharp words from a publication that virtually worshiped Obama during the last campaign and has often offered excuses for him since then.

It is clear today that as a result of conservative gains in recent decades the United States has become much more of a plutocracy than a democracy, the electoral system is now utterly corrupted by big money, gross inequality is our capitalist system's norm, and civil liberties are being shredded.

Public consciousness of this reality has been expanding in recent years, particularly since the onset of the Great Recession — an unusually severe periodic economic failing that “officially” ended three years ago but remains a disaster for the over 60% of the U.S. labor segment who constitute the working class. But the two mass ruling parties, each rejecting or ignoring progressive goals in favor of Republican “heavy” or Democratic “lite” conservative politics, cannot fight the plutocrats or urgently reconstruct what is left of American democracy.

Only a left of center contending party or a truly mass and activist movement that puts forward a fighting progressive program has a chance of dumping the conservative era. The Democrats may be several political degrees better than the Republicans, but they have been gradually tilting toward the right without respite since the demise of the party's final center-left manifestation 44 years ago. They now appear to be hopelessly stagnant and ideologically ill-equipped to transform the conservative era they helped create, even if Obama is reelected in November.

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