



Race for the White House 2012

OBAMA RUNNING AGAINST HIMSELF

Gil Troy

President Barack Obama campaigning in Ohio on October 25. In the end he won Ohio and every other swing state except North Carolina, easily winning the electoral college. Shutterstock.com.

Noted presidential historian Gil Troy observes that in the 2012 US election, President Obama was running against candidate Obama, the candidate of hope and change from 2008. As Troy writes: “In 2012, Barack Obama was running against himself, haunted by the ghost – and hopes – of 2008 – which the complicated realities of his presidency could not match.” As for Republican nominee Mitt Romney, his party had become a captive of the Tea Party on the right. On Election Day, the Democrats got out their vote from a more diverse America than the white America represented by Romney.

En vue de sa réélection, le président Obama de 2012 avait pour principal adversaire le candidat Obama de l'espoir et du changement de 2008, observe le spécialiste de l'histoire présidentielle américaine Gil

Troy : « Barack Obama devait en 2012 triompher de lui-même, hanté qu'il était par le spectre de 2008 et des espoirs déçus par les dures réalités de son premier mandat. » Quant à Mitt Romney, il était devenu à

sa droite l'otage du Tea Party. Au jour du scrutin, les démocrates ont ainsi raflé les suffrages d'une Amérique plus diversifiée que l'Amérique blanche incarnée par le candidat républicain.

In some ways, as unlikely as Barack Obama's election was in 2008, his re-election was even more unlikely. Americans were cranky. Millions were unemployed. President Obama's greatest legislative initiative, the health care reform act, was incomprehensible and unpopular. The halo that had surrounded candidate Obama somehow had disappeared when most citizens looked at President Obama, who failed to deliver the lyrical speeches of 2008 or generate the hope he had stirred back then. Moreover, during the campaign Obama was sometimes distracted, occasionally testy, and not always effective. The president had dangerously low public approval ratings for an incumbent seeking reelection. Most Americans singled out the economy as the top electoral issue and most Americans consistently expressed more faith in Obama's rival to manage the economy. The week before Election Day more than half the country thought the country was headed in the wrong direction. Yet Barack Obama, perhaps America's luckiest politician since Ronald Reagan, was blessed by a weak opponent and a great campaign team who turned out the vote effectively on Election Day while understanding how to make the election more about identity politics than actual policies.

The halo that had surrounded candidate Obama somehow had disappeared when most citizens looked at President Obama, who failed to deliver the lyrical speeches of 2008 or generate the hope he had stirred back then.

For most of the election campaign, Obama's problems with the electorate loomed in the background, while the focus was on the Republican Party's bloodletting, then the Republican candidate's foibles. No modern President has lost reelection without a major internal party challenge – Ronald Reagan challenged Gerald Ford in 1976, before Ford lost to Jimmy Carter, Ted Kennedy challenged Jimmy Carter in 1980, helping Reagan beat Carter, and Pat Buchanan challenged George H.W. Bush in 1992, before Bill Clinton beat Bush. A challenge saps the president, forcing a shift to the extremes where primary voters hang out, before then looking hypocritical in returning to the center seeking the swing voters who sway the general election.

That damaging dynamic was in full view as the Republican Party sought a leader. The field was undistinguished but crowded. Pizza tycoon Herman Cain's moment in the sun, despite having no political experience, was eclipsed by charges of adultery. Texas Governor Rick Perry fizzled, especially after his awkward, buffoonish "oops," when he forgot some basics of his own political platform. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich once again proved to be too mercurial, too much the know-it-all, too unrefined for the

American political big leagues. Congressman Ron Paul was always just a sideshow, a man with a serious libertarian ideology taking advantage of the free publicity the many rounds of televised debates and candidate showcases provided. And former senator Rick Santorum was too doctrinaire and too rigid, even for a Tea Party flavored Republican electorate. This flawed field left former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney standing, a decent man but a bad candidate.



Republican candidate Mitt Romney campaigning in Pennsylvania on election day, November 6. Elections are won in the middle, and he was hobbled by the Tea Party on the right. Shutterstock.com.

Romney, a Mormon whose father George Romney had been a Michigan governor and failed presidential candidate, had a legendary business career. Trained at Harvard Law School and Harvard Business School, Mitt Romney moved Bain Capital from a consulting firm to a takeover and turnaround firm, reaping hundreds of millions of dollars in profits for himself and his partners. Romney was also known for running the Salt Lake City Olympics brilliantly in 2002. But his years as Massachusetts governor were rockier. His great achievement, pushing through a state health care reform, infuriated conservatives, and Romney never seemed to bond with the Massachusetts legislators so necessary to his success – or with Massachusetts voters for that matter.

A patrician Republican plutocrat, with a lordly lifestyle and lacking a light, populist touch, became the gift that kept on giving for Democrats. Having learned from his two presidential predecessors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Obama and his people Swift Boated Romney as viciously as the Bush people Swift Boated John Kerry in 2004. And they did it early with devastating TV ads during the spring and summer, as Clinton's people had done to Senator Bob Dole in 1996.

The result transformed what should have been one of Romney's great advantages – his mastery of business – into a liability. Bain Capital became an albatross burdening the Romney campaign – accused of outsourcing jobs and destroying lives. One campaign commercial had Mitt Romney singing “God Bless America” off key – interspersed with photos and captions accusing him of wiping out jobs in various corporate takeovers. Another campaign commercial essentially had a widower blaming his wife's death on the lost job and insurance benefits that followed a Romney engineered takeover.

Surprisingly, Romney and the Republicans let themselves be mugged. They did not push back aggressively or effectively. The onslaught did somehow convince Romney to allow his advisers to showcase his softer, more theological, and more generous side in the Republican Convention. By then, however, it was too little and too late.

Romney and the Republicans let themselves be mugged. They did not push back aggressively or effectively. The onslaught did somehow convince Romney to allow his advisers to showcase his softer, more theological, and more generous side in the Republican Convention. By then, however, it was too little and too late.

Characteristically, for the 2012 Republicans, as in one of those video games whose floors collapse and present new headaches each time a virtual hero masters the previous set of challenges, as they solved one problem, another, more serious one, emerged. The Republican National Convention did fill in the Romney portrait, but the monochromatic, essentially conservative, old-fashioned sensibility of the party was also apparent. It seemed that the party of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and yes, Ronald Reagan, was now more clearly the party of Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Strom Thurmond, with a too moderate, will-o-the-wisp awkward candidate at the helm.

Romney also had to contend with a media narrative that was much less forgiving of his foibles than of Barack Obama's. Obama may have disappointed, but reporters did not demonstrate much bloodlust in reporting about him. Even while sharing the general frustration and noting his shortcomings, most seemed to lack the will to destroy what they helped create in 2008. Moreover, repudiating the vicious attacks on him from the far right, such as questioning whether he was born in the US (a constitutional prerequisite to be president) and suggesting he was a Muslim, somehow insulated him from the more moderate, substantive critiques about his remoteness, his leadership, and his policies.

By contrast, reporters happily joined the Democratic pile on

against Romney, treating him as a somewhat befuddled rich guy prone to gaffes. In fairness, Romney often made it easy, rudely criticizing the British preparation for the Olympics while visiting the UK – when the Olympics actually proved triumphal – and then getting caught on video dismissively speaking about “47 percent” of the country as being too dependent on entitlements and thus irrevocably opposed to his candidacy. But sometimes, the gaffe narrative distorted the Romney narrative. When Romney went to Israel and criticized Palestinian culture as lacking the democratic and creative dynamism he saw in Israel, reporters mocked it as a gaffe because it was contrary to the politically correct conventional wisdom, but exactly what Romney wished to say.

Just as Obama entered the campaign with dangerously high negatives for an incumbent, Romney entered the campaign with historically high negatives for any presidential candidate.

Just as Obama entered the campaign with dangerously high negatives for an incumbent, Romney entered the campaign with historically high negatives for any presidential candidate. Thanks to the Republican intramural fight, followed by the Democratic barrage all spring and summer, Romney had the highest disapproval ratings of any modern candidate. These two flawed candidates – and the tremendous flow of money and harsh campaign ads from independent sources, thanks to the Supreme Court's expansive, too good to be true for plutocrats *Citizens United* decision – guaranteed that this would be a nasty campaign, with not so much a true winner emerging with a clear mandate but one candidate surviving the deluge of hostility.

Nevertheless, the stakes were high – and Romney raised them by choosing Paul Ryan as a running mate. Ryan's brand of conservatism was just short of Tea Party orthodoxy. Although his Midwestern boyish charm was disarming, his vision of deep budget cuts was alarming to Democrats. Increasingly, it became clear that there was a deep philosophical rift between Democrats and Republicans, that the election was offering voters a choice between liberals who had faith in the federal government's ability to help individuals and seek communal justice versus conservatives who had more faith in the individual along with great skepticism regarding the federal government's efficiency and efficacy.

Romney had a rough spring and a tough summer. The Republican convention did show his kinder, gentler side but his campaign seemed doomed. He was unable to get his message out, unable to take advantage of the president's missteps – because he kept on providing his own. On Sep-

tember 11, an overseas disaster occurred, the kind that could have derailed Obama's re-election campaign. Islamist terrorists overran the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. The American ambassador and three other Americans were killed. The siege lasted for seven hours but the administration did not mobilize quickly enough to see the country's representatives there. And, initially, voices in the administration treated this organized terrorist attack as a spontaneous demonstration against an ugly, offensive video mocking the prophet Muhammad that had been made in America.

Here was a moment for Romney to play Ronald Reagan and cast Obama as Jimmy Carter the apologist, the appeaser, the weakling. But Romney was too hasty, rushing to condemn the administration immediately, so that it looked like he was exploiting American deaths. The information came out slowly and it was weeks before most realized that it had been a seven hour planned siege rather than a rapid riot that grew out of control. And less than a week after this Benghazi debacle, someone, somehow, and I will not point fingers but the timing is suspicious, leaked footage secretly recorded at a Romney campaign fundraiser weeks earlier that showed Romney dismissing those who opposed him as "47 percent" of the country that is unswayable because of a new, un-American addiction to government handouts or "entitlements."

Romney was partly correct. Studies had emerged showing that 46 percent of Americans were not paying taxes and were getting some form of government check.

Romney was partly correct. Studies had emerged showing that 46 percent of Americans were not paying taxes and were getting some form of government check. But that statistic clumped together soldiers and Social Security recipients with welfare cheats, and Romney seemed to be dismissing them all as lazy, greedy, and hostile – not the way to win friends and influence people. The Romney campaign was looking moribund.

Then the debates happened. At the first of three presidential debates in October, with one vice presidential clash after the first presidential one, Americans saw a different Romney: confident, caring, and commanding. Obama seemed distant, distracted, and dismissive. Nevertheless, Romney won the debate even more than Obama lost it. The Democrats had done such a good job caricaturing Romney that when a different Romney showed up, voters warmed to him and felt somewhat snookered by the Democrats' negative campaign.

So the 2012 debates did what debates are supposed to do. They shook up the campaign in the best kind of way, forc-

ing voters to reconcile the image of the candidates' negative campaigning and bad news had conjured up with the more direct impression they had from watching the candidates themselves. While this, too, is an artifice – the days when people imagined television as an "X-ray" of the soul are long gone – it was a welcome corrective. It is far better for a vote to be determined by direct impression than through media hearsay or a rival's hostile caricatures.

Along the way, American voters gained at least four important insights into their two leading presidential contenders. First, both were honorable, decent, talented, and smart men: fast on their feet, extraordinarily poised, able to master the difficult task of sounding intelligent yet intelligible, staying reasonably consistent, and covering a dizzying array of topics, in a fast paced, high pressure format where millions of eyes and ears are scrutinizing you constantly, when you speak, when your rival speaks, and long after the debate, too. From a human perspective, the three debates are brutal, relentless, stomach churning – and both Romney and Obama handled those challenges quite deftly.

Then the debates happened. At the first of three presidential debates in October, with one vice presidential clash after the first presidential one, Americans saw a different Romney: confident, caring, and commanding. Obama seemed distant, distracted, and dismissive.

Americans also learned where each went when flustered or the pressure gets a little unmanageable. When stressed, Romney risked looking too flummoxed or clueless, the chastened preppy seeking his footing in a newly hostile world. Obama risked looking too angry or arrogant, the Golden Child unused to being corrected or confronted by others.

Substantively, the debates uncovered many similarities between the two that were only surprising to partisans who believed their respective party's propaganda that the two had mutually exclusive visions for America. Especially in the final foreign policy debate, Americans discovered that both mistrusted Iran, worried about the Syrian mess, were wary of China, supported Israel, wanted to end the Afghanistan war, and hoped to see the Arab Spring produce democracy. In the 1940s, Republicans and Democrats preached that partisanship should not go beyond the water's edge. While neither candidate in 2012 was quite ready to launch a bipartisan foreign policy, each could have stolen many of the other's lines, with Romney rhapsodizing about peace and Obama hanging tough.

Still, the drama in the debates came from the clashes, and they were substantive, not just stylistic. Even as what we might call the PCP – presidential convergence phenomenon

– would constrain the eventual winner as chief executives lead from the centre – Obama and Romney did disagree about some crucial fundamentals. Obama believed government could help Americans; Romney believed it often burdened them. Obama said his stimulus package and other measures righted the ship and America’s economy after the 2008 crash; Romney feared the growing Obama deficit would sink Americans. Obama celebrated his health care legislation; Romney doubted it. Romney celebrated his tax cut promises and job creation plans; Obama doubted them. These differences promised fundamentally different presidencies, even though Obama also believed in free enterprise, and Romney also acknowledged government’s important role in American life.



A triumphant President Obama on election night. Obama campaign photo.

Ultimately, even with so many hours of debate, many serious issues remained unaddressed. It is unfortunate that this campaign lacked substantive discussion about the growing polarization in politics and the corrupting role of money in the campaign. Each side caricatured the other as guilty without taking any responsibility for also perpetuating the problem. Still, both candidates and the debate moderators ignored other issues that the president could try addressing, such as the epidemics of family breakdown, of violence in the schools, of collapsing social structures, of the perpetually alienated, or of the temporarily demoralized. The United States of America faced serious domestic challenges beyond taxes, regulations, Medicare, and health care. Neglect would only exacerbate them.

In every presidential campaign, Americans assess the present and invest in the future, using history as their guide. In 2012, Barack Obama was running against himself, haunted by the ghost – and hopes – of 2008 – which the complicated realities of his presidency could not match. Mitt Romney was haunted by the ghost – and successes – of Ronald Reagan, unable to measure up to the governor who unseated a Democratic incumbent during times of economic difficulty by displaying great charm and moderating his once harsh conservative image.

In every presidential campaign, Americans assess the present and invest in the future, using history as their guide. In 2012, Barack Obama was running against himself, haunted by the ghost – and hopes – of 2008 – which the complicated realities of his presidency could not match.

The debates, ultimately, gave both Romney and Obama opportunities to shine – as Obama came back in the second and third debates. And the debates reminded us all that these presidential campaigns are not settled affairs, not done deals. History happens, and democracy does what democracy should do, encouraging leader-to-led discourse and empowering the people.

Even as the polls showed that those surveyed considered Romney the winner of the first debate by landslide proportions, the vice presidential debate was more of a tie. Democrats who went in primed to like Biden applauded his slash and burn aggressiveness. Republicans who went in primed to like Ryan applauded his wonky Boy Scout earnestness. In the end, this vice presidential debate, like most, had little impact on the electoral outcome. But the big question this debate raised was one of debating dignity. Biden’s performance – and he was clearly performing – included smirking, scoffing, chuckling, and guffawing, although he mostly skipped the sighing which hurt Al Gore’s standing in 2000 when he debated George W. Bush.

The quest for dignity is as old as the republic. It reflected America’s more elitist and character oriented republican roots, as well as the monarchical dimensions involved in executive leadership. Originally, the candidate’s virtue as expressed through his dignity was so cherished it was considered undignified for presidential candidates to run; they stood for election, as George Washington did. But the waves of democracy that transformed America also changed campaigning protocols, launching candidates into the hurly burly of the political process.

Toward the end of the campaign, the Obama campaign emphasized wedge identity issues over defining policy issues,

seeking to mobilize its coalition of women, African Americans, Latinos, gays, young voters, and particularly educated voters. The Romney campaign did not push back effectively. Suddenly, four decades after the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, long after most Americans settled on a consensus about this difficult, heartbreaking issue – that abortions should be safe, legal, and rare – partisans started claiming the abortion question was still in play.

Responding to some of the broadest, least likely to be implemented rhetoric of Romney and Ryan, the *New York Times* ran a lead editorial in mid October darkly warning that “A Romney-Ryan victory could result in recriminalizing abortion in much of America.” Such grandstanding from both sides ignored the fact that five Republican presidents since 1973 failed to outlaw abortion.

Abortion, therefore, was the ultimate blue and red herring. The abortion issue served more as a signifier, as a secret decoder ring, bringing citizens into one faction or the other in the great American political divide, than as a serious political issue. And in a cranky, divided, intemperate culture where shades of grey were accepted as trashy literature but not in politics, the abortion blue-red herring did its dirty work as the supersized wedge issue, obscuring the consensus, rangling extremists, and poisoning the political atmosphere.

Ultimately, Election Day taught those who had not already grasped this essential lesson that Americans were now living in Obamerica. Obamerica is multi-racial, not just white. It has many religions and many secularists, not just Protestants. It has many different forms of living arrangements, not just the mom, the dad, 2.2 kids, the white picket fence, and the suburban two car garage. It is multicultural, multiethnic, less monolithic, and more diverse sociologically, ideologically, and politically.

Had Obama lost, his election could have been dismissed as an Obamanomaly, a fluke – or, more accurately, a premature harbinger of change. But the new America that Obama represents and leads was best illustrated in the competing optics of the two political party conventions last summer. The Republican convention looked like a Midwestern church social, overwhelmingly white, square, and traditional. The Democratic convention looked like an urban club scene, multi-racial, hip, and progressive. And the numbers on Election Day confirmed this – Obama’s army of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, young Americans, well educated Americans, and women triumphed over Romney’s white bread coalition of the well bred – and their wannabes.

Just as the classic American political movie *The Candidate* ends with Robert Redford’s unexpected electoral victory and the unnerving question “What do we do now?” Obama has to figure out “What do we do now?” Part of the answer is watch and wait. There is this phenomenon called the business cycle. Had Obama been forcibly retired, the 7.9 percent unemployment rate would have defined him. Instead, a slim

majority of Americans gave him four more years to watch the markets continue to recover, and for Americans to retool, revive, and return to prosperity.

Obama’s army of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, young Americans, well educated Americans, and women triumphed over Romney’s white bread coalition of the well bred – and their wannabes.

But passivity is not an option in 2012; waiting is not enough. The first major challenge Obama must face is the Republicans’ enduring enmity. The man who promised to change Washington and heal the nation cannot continue to be proof that Washington is gridlocked and the nation hopelessly divided. It is not just this looming “fiscal cliff” of nearly \$500 billion in automatic cuts and tax hikes to fight the deficit. Obama’s legacy will be shaped by his ability to live up to his 2008 vow to create a new kind of politics. Blaming Republican obstructionism for his failure is not good enough.

In addition to fording the gap with Republicans and not falling off the economic cliff, Obama has to worry about the unemployment pit, the health care fog, and the Middle East morass. Too many Americans are unemployed and need to rejoin the work force. Obamacare remains too complex, and too undefined – now the president has a chance to oversee its implementation. And the messes in Iran, Syria, Libya – and who knows where next – still loom large.

Finally, Obama has to worry about the second term curse. Second term presidents quickly become lame ducks – and have recently run into real trouble: Nixon with the Watergate hearings, Reagan with Iran-Contra, Clinton with the Lewinsky scandal, and George W. Bush with the great crash. Presidential power starts ebbing as inauguration day ends. Obama has to figure out how to show the people that he is in charge, that he has a vision, and that he can do the difficult, complex, but critical job, his America, Obamerica, just rehired him to do.

Four years earlier, the achievement was in the election itself, the election of an African American who described himself as a skinny guy with a funny name. This time around, the achievement is going to have to be in the achievements. 

Contributing Writer Gil Troy (gil.troy@mcgill.ca) is Professor of History at McGill University. A noted presidential historian, he is the author of the acclaimed Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s (Princeton University Press) and Moderates Make the Best Presidents: George Washington to Barack Obama, just published by University of Kansas Press.