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# OBAMA, ROMNEY, AND THE FIGHT FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

By Ethan Young

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## Muckraking for Sale

In the battle for the White House, the predominant depiction by the media industry portrays the opposing camps of the Democratic incumbent, Barack Obama, and his Republican challenger, the multi-millionaire and former Governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, as irreconcilable. But are the political differences between them really as large as the media industry makes it seem?

Many things, such as the “view from below,” confirm this: based on both parties’ rank and file, there are in fact important differences regarding the future course of the country. In addition, the Tea Party movement has driven the already conservative Republican Party even further to the right, while on the other side of the political spectrum, Occupy Wall Street has put leftist issues, above all the growing social inequality, on the nation’s agenda.

However, a “view from above” presents a completely different image. Viewed from this angle, the candidates of both parties are neo-liberal politicians competing for the favors of the major corporations and, at best, differentiating themselves by representing different factions of U.S. capital. In comparison with what is politically necessary in view of the global social and ecological challenges, the programmatic differences shrink to a minimum.

However, there is another reason for the competition for the patronage of the elites: if past electoral battles for the presidency had already become billion-dollar mud baths, then the Supreme Court decision (“Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission”) of 2010 opened the gates for big capital to decisively influence the electoral process.

Ethan Young, author and activist from Brooklyn, New York, analyzes the political situation at the beginning of the heated phase of the election campaign. He also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both candidates and parties in the context of the political developments of the last decade. He argues that a fundamental shift in the current state of affairs will only occur if the political vacuum on the left is finally filled again.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, August 2012*

# Obama, Romney, and the Fight for the White House

By Ethan Young

The fault lines in U.S. society have always run deep but at no time in memory have they appeared so blatantly in the run-up to a presidential election. The cause is not the distance between the two candidates, as both sides claim. What stimulates this American reckoning is the sea change in the nation's positioning in the world, the rise of those whom history classified as "minorities," and the sharp decline in living standard for average citizens. Reaganite patriotism has run up against post-Cold War realities.

Every socioeconomic shift impacts on the ever-present racial divide. Stark racial polarization is a backlash response to the election of the first African American president, which rocked society on its heels despite the loud self-congratulation over this historic breakthrough.

"Fear of a black planet" (as the hip-hop group Public Enemy described modern racism) has spurred a flood of coded euphemisms in public discourse: Obama is a "Muslim," a "socialist," and a Harvard "elitist" out of touch with "real Americans" because, implicitly, he isn't one. The anonymity of the Internet provides the broadest medium for overt racism since the Civil Rights

Movement—mostly aimed at the President and his family.

Open expressions of racism from leaders of the major parties denote a shift from the norms accepted since the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Those who grew up in the U.S. since the early 1970s are usually either puzzled by the hate (especially when it comes from mainstream Republicans)—or, if they have a sense of history, infuriated. Ideological polarization is now shaping public perception of the election.

The schism between Right and Center-Left runs unevenly through and across racial, gender, generational, rural/urban, and class lines. It is not clear how either side will muster the votes necessary to win decisively. And a decisive win is all-important. We have already seen one close election—2000—settled not by the popular vote but through a ruling by the Right-dominated Supreme Court. Both candidates are facing serious roadblocks which could lead to another breakdown of the electoral system. Moments of such instability have historically led to an increase of physical attacks by the well-armed, increasingly paranoid far Right against their perceived enemies.

## Obama: Incumbency in Peril

President Obama's popular standing is uncertain. Current polls put him ahead of his presumed opponent Mitt Romney. The President

can take some personal credit for this; he's a skilled communicator. However, traditionally, incumbents lose when unemployment is high or

the cost of living (i.e., gas prices) is rising out of reach. This grim fact stalks Obama's campaign, but he faces other, more complex problems.

Obama's stance toward his active base is similar to that of his political co-thinker and predecessor, Bill Clinton. But unlike Clinton, he based his 2008 campaign on a strong appeal to the Left on peace and equal rights.

Obama's identification in office with the military, Wall Street, and privatization has turned a lot of earlier support into indifference at best. His 2008 message—"Hope and Change"—sparked great enthusiasm in the fragmented Left, especially after two terms of the unapologetically reactionary George W. Bush. It reached the communities of color in the inner cities, and the electoral sectors most influenced by Left social movements: women, gender minorities, environmentalists, peace activists and sympathizers, etc. To the extent that NGOs and community groups could legally endorse and campaign for Obama, they did so. Unions and the Left wing of the Democratic Party saw him as their champion, and while his appeals on issues such as national health care and taxing the rich were measured, there were great expectations that fueled a campaign that resembled a social movement in itself.

Once in office, Obama has tried to distance himself from the Left, sought bipartisan agreements with the Right in Congress (futilely), and thus claim the mantle of the Center for himself. He backed away from his own promises

to de-corporatize health care, defend labor's right to organize, and close the Guantanamo gulag, among many other dangerous concessions to the Bush agenda he ran against.

As a result, a significant portion of Obama's active base—those involved in organizing, training, and door-to-door canvassing—will be motivated by fear of a Republican victory more than loyalty to their candidate. This could pose big problems in a tight contest, since it reflects a more general disillusionment with his less-than-progressive administration.

However, since both electoral parties are anchored by capital, Obama's biggest worry is winning the approval of a majority—however narrow—of the power elite. This can be gauged by the amount of his corporate donations, and by the tone the mainstream media take in reporting and commenting on his campaign. At present Obama continues to represent the Center in the mainstream media political circus. (Republican leadership found it necessary to run the "moderate" Romney, despite the base's clear preference for a far Rightist, to avoid being tagged extremist.) Yet while it seems unlikely, the over-the-top Murdoch screed could come to predominate before November. In that case, if Obama is constantly vilified on television news and in the daily and weekly press (in addition to paid opposition ads), it means that the ruling classes have turned their backs on his particular brand of "realpolitik" foreign policy and limited defense of the social safety net (Medicare, Social Security, etc.).

## **The Turn to the Right in the Power Elite**

The turn to the right in the power elite is indicated by the rise of social Darwinist, free marketeer ideology that reflects the imperatives of neoliberalism.

It is dominant in the Federalist Society, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).

The Federalist Society is a conservative phalanx of judges, lawyers, and law professors who now dominate the legal system. One of its founders is Robert Bork, whose 1987 nomination to the Supreme Court by Reagan was halted by a broad coalition. Bork is now Romney's key advisor on judicial appointments.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce describes itself as "the world's largest business federation representing more than 3 million businesses and

organizations of every size, sector, and region." Their pro-business agenda opposes regulation and reforms pursued by labor and social movements. The major forces behind the chamber include the enormously powerful oil and pharmaceutical companies.

ALEC serves as a conduit between corporations and state legislators with the goal of advancing or altering laws in line with corporate interests.

## Leader or Pariah?

Until the divided power elite's firm presidential preference is settled, Obama's position is doubly precarious.

Polls show that Obama holds fast to his core voter bases:

- ⇒ the two largest racial/national "other" communities, African Americans and Latinos (excluding the older generation of Cuban-Americans);
- ⇒ the younger generation of "Millennials," especially students;
- ⇒ college-educated workers and professionals, mostly located in the public sector (i.e., government employees), and
- ⇒ organized labor.

Add to these the millions of women disaffected from the Republicans after Romney's public rejection of women's rights to woo elusive social conservative (particularly religious Right) voters.

But Obama still lacks support from white, non-educated workers, especially middle-aged

and older—commonly referred to as the middle class. And he is feared by the financial sector he worked so hard to bolster from the start of his term. In the first case, this can be traced to rising economic insecurity and racism (including deep-rooted, festering fear of black retribution). In the second, a similar phobia is at play: Wall Street itself has become a pariah, thanks to its own public profligacy and inherent elitism.

Profiteers are terrified of popular backlash because they know what they have gotten away with. They tend to view Romney as one of their own, in class even more than racial terms, and fear that Obama's loyalty to them is compromised by his base and his lack of business world credentials.

Obama, attempting to draw needed support from polarized social sectors, is himself pulled in different directions. Romney tries to resolve the problem by lying outright and reversing and betraying himself day after day. Obama is trying to balance between middle class voters' yearning for security and the fear of regulation held by the financial sector, a crucial funding source. For both groups, an improved economy carries more weight than his campaign message.

## Mitt Romney's Options

Short of real job growth, Obama's best hope may be Romney's liabilities. The Republican candidate seems as out of place as bible study in a strip joint. He is a feckless self-promoter who has to appear far Right to his active base and Center-Right (his original orientation) to the public.

North Carolina organizer Bob Wing describes the political system:

*U.S. parties are shaped by candidates and office-holders, rather than by long-term party leaders or ideology, let alone a definite social base. U.S. parties are wide coalitions led by revolving candidates/electeds with vague politics that appeal to multiple constituencies that are generally not strongly organized and often have conflicting interests.*

At the base, the Republican Party (under the dominance of corporate capital) has become a club of small businessmen, religious Rightists, libertarian cranks and paranoid gun fetishists, whose hate for the President smolders. Romney is not one of them. He comes from big government (ran a Northeastern state with a reputation for bleeding-heart liberalism); big business (Bain Capital, famous for destroying small companies); the "East Coast elite" (two degrees from Harvard); inherited wealth (which he can't conceal no matter how hard he tries to slum it); and a religious background (Mormon) which most fundamentalists find alien and even profane.

In short, the hyper-conservative ranks of the party have a candidate that incarnates everything they hate about the moderate, schooled aristo-bureaucracy they thought they had overthrown in the Tea Party tsunami of 2010.

Romney simply cannot win on the basis of his personal appeal. His nomination more reflects

the far Right's unacknowledged marginality than the Center-Right's real following beyond the corporate dealmakers. The Republican base is so demoralized that it could tear itself apart even before the election. This leaves Romney with just a few cards to play. But those cards are important.

First, Romney is the only alternative to Obama in this race. Those determined to push out the President will have to hold their noses, like so many Leftists have for so many years, and vote for the lesser evil. This prospect might be sweetened by picking a far Right running mate (the Palin ploy), but it could further alienate the coveted independent "swing voters."

Second, Romney has unlimited funds for advertising, whether or not he gets the lion's share of elite support. That money will be spent vilifying Obama.

Finally, he has a wild card: the curtailing of voting rights at the level of state governments. Laws are being pushed in state legislatures designed to make it more difficult for important Democratic sectors to vote. These laws are formulated by Rightist, corporate-backed think tanks, then submitted (and sometimes passed) by the new Republican majorities established in 2010.

The hysterical charges, the scramble to limit voting rights, and the determination to flood the airwaves with constant campaign ads, all testify to the Republicans' panic at the prospect of losing. Their theme, realistic or not, proclaims that this is the "last chance" before some enormous power shift will change America forever. It's hard to make sense of this, except as an appeal to white paranoia.

## Left and Right

The Left is still even more marginal than the right, but growing—in part because labor populism and cosmopolitanism have begun to counter xenophobia and social conservatism. While the Left is still years away from developing into a coherent political force, polls show broader acceptance of Occupy, gay marriage, wealth redistribution, progressive taxation, etc.

Even with greater organized numbers and influence, the far Right is losing momentum relative to Occupy Wall Street and mass rejection of Republican attacks on union rights and social movements. In 2011 the Midwest was shaken by a mass response to anti-democracy and anti-union measures taken by newly elected Tea Party-Right state legislators. The fight is still going on: a recall campaign targeting the governor of Wisconsin swept the state. In November, Ohio's unions mobilized voters to defeat an anti-union law by a 61 to 39 margin. Citizens of Michigan are enraged at moves to replace elected town governments with state-appointed, corporate-backed "emergency financial managers." Mass protests have caught both the Center and the Right off-guard.

Republican moves have also sparked a resurgence of social movements. A gun lobby-inspired law in Florida led to police delaying by weeks the arrest of a vigilante who shot and killed an unarmed black youth, Trayvon Martin, on the basis of the shooter's personal concern for his community's "safety." The size and fury of the response recalled the Civil Rights Movement at its peak. State government attempts to repress birth control along with abortion rights has similarly struck a chord with the supposedly "post-feminist" generation. Social media instantly linked millions to the unrest and rallied thousands locally.

The far Right is also embittered by Center-Right stonewalling of their progress after the 2010 victories. The links that hold their coalition together are not solid. The ranks of the Right include armed fascists and rigid reactionaries but also Ron Paul libertarians, whose philosophy is based more on individualism and personal wealth than on collective crusade against power structures and vulnerable social groups.

The far Right's exclusion from real decision-making in the Republican Party strains their loyalty and may set them against the more established leadership and each other. While this would benefit the Democrats, if political tensions pose a threat to social peace they would accelerate a strong trend towards a more generally repressive state.

At this point in the early campaign season, both Left and Right social movements are recovering from body blows. In early June, the effort to recall Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin was defeated, in part due to massive ad spending by big Republican money. This was to be expected, but the Left was further demoralized by the inability of the Democrats and public sector unions to counter sentiment against government workers among private sector workers and rural voters.

The Right was staggered by the unexpected Supreme Court ruling in favor of Obama's health-care plan in late June. "Obamacare" (an insurance industry-friendly plan first implemented at the state level by Massachusetts Governor Romney) was viewed as a litmus test, separating the real conservatives from conciliators of socialism. The deciding vote came from conservative standard bearer Chief Justice John Roberts who parted company with his faction at a most

crucial moment. The far Right's fears of being ignored or abandoned were suddenly realized. It is still unclear how these new twists will affect the vote in November. Unions received a bitter lesson about the limits of their mobilizing power. The Tea Party movement had a moment of

reckoning regarding just how much power they wield in the current order. The contest for the hearts and minds of swing voters continues amid rising unemployment figures and fresh scandals and embarrassments emerging from the Romney camp.

## Gaming the Electoral College

The U.S. electoral system was originally constructed to enfranchise white, propertied males only, and its democratization is an ongoing process with a long way to go.

Small, rural (mostly Republican) states have disproportionate power in the actual election of presidents through the Electoral College and in the U.S. Senate. Bob Wing writes:

*The Founding slaveholders invented the Electoral College out of thin air to serve their interests. [...] The Electoral College ... [provides] to each state a number of Electors equal to the size of its congressional delegation. With a lock on the House of Representatives and the presidency thanks to the three-fifths rule, slaveholders held the presidency for 50 of the 72 years [before the Civil War]. Since reactionary Southerners switched en masse from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in protest of the 1960s civil rights legislation, the College has given the Republicans a running head start to win the presidency.*

*The racial bias embedded in the Electoral College system is the structural basis of the notoriously racist and highly successful Southern Strategy pursued by the Republicans over the last forty years. The winner-take-all Electoral College system ensures, even requires, that about half of all voters of color be marginalized or totally ignored ... [The] system gives as much as three times as much weight to the mainly conservative and white Republicans in the rural states compared to states with large, racially diverse and majority Democratic populations.*

*For example, Wyoming has a little more than 240,000 voters but despite its small population is*

*awarded three Electoral College votes. Although the average population per congressional seat is about 700,000 (with varying numbers of voters but always much greater than Wyoming's 240,000), every state no matter how small is guaranteed a minimum of two Senators and one congressperson. Consequently Wyoming has about one Electoral vote for every 80,000 or so voters. By comparison large population states like California receive about one Electoral College vote for every 220,000 voters.*

However, Center-Left pundit Michael Tomasky speculates that the Electoral College may actually work in Obama's favor, despite very close polling numbers. Of the eleven likely swing states (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia), Obama is leading in nine, Romney only in two (Arizona and Missouri), and even there his margin is small. For Romney, therefore, it could be a tough challenge to reach the required majority of 270 electoral votes: "If the Republican Party of the last few years hadn't done everything it could possibly imagine do to alienate Latinos, 'new-economy' professionals, and young people, the party would have remained competitive", writes Tomasky. "But the Republicans chose not to be that party. They decided to be the hate-and-anger party, and they veritably shoved states like those I just mentioned into the Democratic column."

The uncertainty of the Right and the isolation and organizational incoherence of the Left bode ill for the year ahead. Fervent hostility from the

Right has already taken violent forms, most starkly in the near-fatal shooting of Gabrielle Gifford, a moderate Democratic member of Congress.

Should Obama win, it will again be with the help of a base well to his left, but there is no evidence that he will change his Centrist governing stance. Exercising real power will require a level of organization and political sophistication that historically the Left has lacked. The gain for the Left will be a sharper political understanding of what Democratic administrations can and cannot be made to do.

An Obama reelection will also strengthen and broaden the public will to resist the Right. This will be very important, as the far Right is likely to go to even further extremes, from legal assault to actual violence.

If Romney is elected, we will probably see a fierce, top-to-bottom resurgence of the Right—from “free market” zealots to open racists—that neither national nor local governments will try to contain. The “hope” that rallied progressives in 2008 has shifted to the promising developments of the last year, Occupy Wall Street in particular. But until the political vacuum on the Left is filled, American power will be more or less dictated by the fears and preoccupations of the corporate Center-Right.

The debate has begun: on one hand, the scramble for short-term profit margins; on the other, saving the climate, the national living standard, and geopolitical alternatives to endless war. If the goals of the next administration begin and end with the market, then the electorate may face a catastrophe in 2016.

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