

US ELECTION: 2012

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The re-election of Barack Obama is noteworthy for what it says about the United States. It is important for both Americans and non-Americans to understand what it reveals.

Faced with a daunting array of obstacles and an opponent who had actively sought the presidency for seven years, Obama not only won but his party added to its majority in the Senate and improved its position in the House of Representatives. Merely listing the obstacles dramatizes the magnitude of the achievement.

As was the case four years earlier, Obama had to surmount the nasty racism that still exists in the country, as well as related questions about his nationality and religion.

The U.S. economy is not in good shape -- unemployment remains painfully prevalent, young people (one of his core supporting groups) have suffered disproportionately, incomes of the employed have stagnated, income inequality persists and grows, the level of public debt has markedly risen and became a political issue, and fears have been raised about the sustainability of the social safety net on which the poor and the elderly groups depend.

The signal social achievement of the President's first term -- revision of the national system of health care coverage and cost -- became the focus of such broad, loud and sustained opposition that 50% of voters were said to want it repealed.

Religious and conservative organizations mobilized opposition to his positions on immigration, contraception, abortion and support of same-sex marriage.

In several parts of the country, states and localities enacted barriers to voting that were designed to limit access to ballots by groups thought to strongly support Obama.

Thanks largely to recent judicial rulings, wealthy organizations and individuals were able to make such massive (and in some cases, secret) contributions to critics and opponents that \$1 billion was spent on just adverse TV and radio advertising.

The election campaign paid meager attention to international affairs or any achievements there. So how did he do it?

The highest priority in explanation has to be the President's four year record and the contrast with the proposals of his opponent across the full spectrum of social, economic and governmental matters, both domestic and foreign. This enabled him to retain and augment those who had supported him four years before.

This support brought literally millions of volunteers to his campaign, individuals who gave time and effort to a multitude of individually small tasks, such as knocking on doors and making phone calls. Cumulatively, they did far more and devoted more hours than paid campaign staff ever could.

But there was also a large staff. It was supported by the developers of a highly sophisticated voter tracking system that created targets for staff and volunteers. It enabled the focus on voter registration, assessment of support, targeted messaging, and reminders to actually vote that reportedly overwhelmed opposition efforts to the same ends.

All this takes money, on top of the cost of TV and radio advertising. Reportedly, combined the two campaigns spent \$2.6 billion, divided almost equally. Each received large and multitudes of small contributions. Proportionately, far more of Obama's money arrived in smaller amounts. (Some Romney supporters made individual contributions in the \$50 - 100 million range.)

The most noteworthy aspect of the election is revealed not by these factors but by examining who voted for re-election. Obama's victory was a victory of minorities. Older white, married people largely voted for Romney. The groups that voted largely for Obama were people under 45, unmarried women, and Americans of African, Hispanic and Asian extraction -- either immigrants or their descendants. They preferred him massively. They constitute close to a third of the electorate.

These are precisely the groups that are progressively becoming larger proportions of the total American population. If Obama's opponent had received the same percentages of the votes from various demographic groups that he did AND those groups each held the same proportion of the total population that they held 20-30 years ago, Romney would have won. But in that time the composition of the U.S. voting population has changed markedly.

The U.S. has become a conglomerate of minorities. The old vision of the country as dominated by older, white, predominately Protestant, males does not describe the America of the foreseeable future. A glimpse of that future may be the incoming U.S. Senate, until recently the domain of white males. Of the 100 members, 19 will be women, one a non-Christian of Asian extraction and another, a self-announced lesbian.

The message for Americans and for those abroad who seek to understand the country is that future U.S. policy will be driven by the beliefs and values of this new definition of who is an American.