



The American Political Discourse in 2012

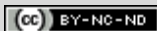
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Abstract

The concept of globalization refers to a multitude of processes rapidly changing the space in which individuals, institutions, and systems interact with one another. Popular interpretations have seen increasing interconnectedness as the beginning of a “race to the bottom” in which the state is precluded from governance as a competition to attract capital and prevent flight mandates a retrenchment of the public sector. As this occurs, outside influences should crowd out opportunities for the “collective priority and preference setting” that defines democratic governance. Instead, much of the the convergence toward retrenchment has been endogenous change motivated by ideas and political strategy rather than exogenous economic pressure. America’s protracted battle over the debt ceiling provides a compelling case to explore how the ideational force of globalization has included new voices in domestic preference setting and augmented rather than crowded out public deliberation. Tracking the impact of these influences on the American discourse will help us understand how the 2012 elections are likely to be impacted by the emergence of groups willing and able to compete with the Republican Party on behalf of economic conservatives..

Keywords: *debt ceiling, globazliation, convergence, conviction politics*



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“Governance is a game that many people and organizations get to play.” - B. Guy Peters

“Compromises led us into this mess, and you can’t compromise your way out of it.” - Rep. Tom Graves, R-GA

The concept of globalization has come to refer to a multitude of processes rapidly changing the space in which individuals, institutions, and systems interact with one another. Popular interpretations have seen increasing interconnectedness as the beginning of a ‘race to the bottom’ in which the state is precluded from governance as competition to attract capital and prevent flight mandates a retrenchment of the public sector. As this occurs, outside influences should crowd out opportunities for the “collective priority and preference setting” which defines democratic governance.¹ Instead, much of the convergence toward retrenchment has been endogenous change motivated by ideas and political strategy rather than exogenous economic pressure.² America’s protracted battle over the debt ceiling provides a compelling case to explore how the ideational force of globalization has included new voices in domestic preference setting and augmented rather than crowded out public deliberation. Tracking the impact of these influences on the American discourse will help us understand what this could mean for the 2012 elections.

America’s Changing Ideational Setting

In December 2008, the public was divided over the appropriate role of government and the rising public debt was almost absent from the national discussion (about 3 percent of the public mentioned it as a top priority).³ At the time, the Obama stimulus enjoyed the support of 56 percent of the American public. As CNN Polling Director Keating Holland observed, “with the economy in such poor shape, government action to stimulate the economy seem[ed] to get an exemption to the general concerns about big government.”⁴ Less than three years later, the economy was still in dismal shape, “stimulus” had become a dirty word, and reducing the national public debt was the top policy priority for more Americans than it had been for 15 years (around 17 percent).⁵ Former IMF Chief Economist Ken Rogoff noted that although “no one was talking about debt a year ago,” a sudden conflict over the debt had swept America into the “debt crisis” enveloping the Western world. Ultimately, this political battle damaged international perceptions of the American system (one prominent European investor called it “an end of empire moment”) and provoked the nation’s first credit downgrade as Congressional approval ratings fell to historic lows.⁶ Although Republicans appealed to the concurrent crisis emerging in Europe as evidence that nothing but immediate and extensive cutbacks in government spending could avert a looming debt crisis of our own, the credit downgrade that followed was not attributed to systemic risk but to uncertainty caused by the state of domestic politics and political discourse; the apathy of bond markets reflected this.

The politicization of the debt ceiling was a product of the changing way in which citizens and policy-makers think about and experience politics. Whereas the European debt crisis arose out of unsustainable levels of debt, slow growth, and skyrocketing bond yields, as Chief Market Strategist at Russell Investments Steve Wood explained, “the US downgrade [was] about long-term political will, whereas in Europe there [were] immediate risks.”⁷

Leading up to the conflict, conservative activists manipulated the political space in which the leadership of both parties (and the executive branch) were operating, using the crisis in Europe to bring debt to the forefront of the national discussion and recasting a raise in the debt ceiling as an abuse of power rather than a routine requirement of governance in the United States.⁸ This shift in the subject of American discourse brought on by the forces of independent conviction organizations had a profound impact on the agenda and strategies of both parties. The activist offensive had two distinct stages: one communicative (intended to shape the public's beliefs about their interests) and one coordinative (aimed at policy-makers).⁹



The fight over the White House in 2012 will focus on “conviction politics.”

Source: whitehouse.gov

Convictions

The “emergence of ‘conviction politics,’ especially on the political right” became an “element of political life” in the 1970s and 1980s in response to economic shock and growing concerns over the fate of democratic economies in a globalized world.¹⁰ During this period, neo-liberal “beliefs at the elite level” animated political life in the developed democracies and “successfully permeated mass thinking about government.”¹¹ These widely held ideas characterize government as an institution inherently inefficient, ineffective, and inferior to the functioning of institutions in the private sector, and politicians as

irreducibly self-interested and rational.¹² Without government retrenchment to prevent capital flight and crowding out of more effective private sector efforts, slowing growth, ballooning deficits, and economic decline are inevitable.¹³ Following these discourses, there has been an astonishing deterioration of public confidence in public sector performance throughout world’s industrialized democracies, a trend “most pronounced” in the US.¹⁴ The growing attitude of hostility felt by US citizens toward their government has been frequently documented. In 1958, an overwhelming 73 percent of American respondents to the National Election Study “trusted the government to do what is right just about always or most of the time.” Currently, that number stands at a meager 22 percent, with only 3 percent of the public saying that the government will do what is right “just about always.” According to Pew Research Center, “by almost every conceivable measure Americans are less positive and more critical of government.”¹⁵

While these neo-liberal ideas and the activists who promote them have been powerful in global politics for decades, they have enjoyed a renewed relevance in response to the new global economic crisis. According to the 2011 Pew typology:

*The most visible shift in the political landscape since Pew Research’s previous political typology in early 2005 is the emergence of a single bloc of across-the-board conservatives. The long-standing divide between economic, pro-business conservatives and social conservatives has blurred.*¹⁶

Along with the rest of the democratic world, the American public has been moving toward a neo-liberal consensus for some time. However, the success of Barack Obama as a presidential candidate was a testament to how receptive the public was to ideas radically inconsistent with the entrenched neo-liberal perspective. Not only did Obama rally liberals and minorities through an appeal to citizens’ “hope” for better government, but he successfully drew a significant number of independents and moderate Republicans to his camp as well. Following the

Democrats' sweep in 2008, conservative activists launched an "intensive deployment of... rhetorics" characterizing Obama's policy responses to the crisis as harmful.¹⁷ This assault had a real impact on public perceptions, particularly independents dissatisfied with the pace of recovery. Although heavy losses are in accordance with the general trends expected for American election cycles, the reaction against the president and his party in 2010 was distinctly atypical in its enthusiasm, tone, and content.¹⁸

The simple economic arguments associated with conviction politics furnished activists and their candidates with a convincing communicative discourse and a clear critique of liberal solutions which could be effectively marketed to the public. By 2011, the four voting blocs that support Republican candidates held as a "key belief" that "government is almost always wasteful and inefficient."¹⁹ While this belief spread to 55 percent of the total US population (evidencing encroachment of neo-liberal arguments into Democratic voters), 73 percent of disaffecteds, 82 percent of libertarians, 72 percent of "Main Street" Republicans, and an astonishing 90 percent of staunch conservatives said that this is the case. While voices coming from the Democratic side were frequently divided, conservatives ranging from the business elite to Evangelical Christians were all making similar arguments, which served to bolster the perceived credibility of their ideas.²⁰

After the January 2010 *Citizens United vs FEC* Supreme Court decision, which overturned provisions of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act that restricted the spending ability of corporations and unions for being in violation of the First Amendment, hundreds of millions of dollars in independent expenditures began flowing into the hands of conservative advocacy networks (almost double the independent expenditures spent on Democrats).²¹ Independent of the party establishment, these networks of activists were motivated by conviction and were willing to risk legislative power before compromising on their positions. Organizations ranging from grassroots elements of the Tea Party and political

entrepreneurs such as Grover Norquist to quasi-grassroots movements funded by the Koch brothers joined in a communicative initiative to adapt popular but vaguely-held neo-liberal sentiments to the American economic situation (by linking debt, spending, and taxes to high unemployment and slow growth). Additionally, there was a coordinative effort to force the Republican Party away from the political center by relentlessly policing the ideological purity of its candidates by using implicit and explicit threats of primary challenges. Seeing the success of Republican candidates, the money behind them, and the popularity of their ideas, an element in the Republican leadership worked to incorporate the push for ideological purity into the party's electoral strategy.²²

Consequences for American Public Policy

In 2010, the confluence of unrestricted money pouring into conviction-oriented campaigns, and public anxiety about the slow pace of the economic recovery turned independents against the president and the candidates associated with him.²³ In advance of the 2010 elections, the Republican Party began to tailor its strategy to court these conviction groups by recruiting candidates affiliated with the Tea Party.²⁴ While this strategy brought a wave of Republicans (especially those affiliated with conviction movements) back into government, there were signs of the unexpected consequences from the very beginning: the new funding gave these networks significant influence over the Republican Party's choice of nominees as conviction groups repeatedly proved their willingness to fight for more consistent but less electable candidates. The consequences of these changes would be exposed in the fight over the nation's debt ceiling.

Speaking of...

With the growing power of moneyed advocacy groups, ideological policing quickly became a part of Republican political culture, and outside groups made it clear that the debt ceiling was an issue they would fight. Influential commentator Sarah Palin famously reminded GOP freshmen elected with Tea Party support that for those thinking of supporting a compromise reached between Boehner and Obama that “everyone I talk to still believes in contested primaries.” The President and CEO of FreedomWorks Matt Kibbe used the confrontation to request an “outpouring of donations ... to sound the alarms and expand our mobilization efforts to ensure Congress doesn’t cave into the Boehner Plan,” calling the fight “SO critical” and adding “RINO’s beware: There will be serious consequences at the ballot box for Republicans blinking on this issue.” On July 27, a press release from the group called Boehner’s proposal to create a “supercommittee” to work out a deal over the debt a “tax hike in disguise.” Karl Rove’s Crossroads GPS spent \$20 million on television ads in the months leading up to the August 2 deadline preaching the danger posed by the national debt while equally emphasizing the destruction which would result from tax increases.

Activist organizations began pressing their coordinative discourse on Congress months before the first vote on raising the debt ceiling had taken place. In May, Tea Party activists held an event (including activists dressed as George Washington and the Chairman of Freedom Jamboree dressed as Paul Revere) at the National Press Club urging Republicans to stand firm against a raise in the debt ceiling and targeting Speaker Boehner the day of his address to the New York Economic Club. The groups participating also announced the beginning of “RINO hunting season,” referring to “Republicans in name only.”

This coordination was sustained right up to the August deadline. On July 27, Tea Party Express held a rally visible from the Capital building and the Club for Growth (another notorious primary challenger) reiterated its opposition to any deal. Citizens United announced just days before the final vote that they would be pouring money into the reelection campaign of Representative Jim Jordan—facing the possibility of punishment from the GOP after his boisterous confrontation with the Speaker—in order to “remind Speaker Boehner and the rest of the Republican establishment that the ‘Cup, Cap, Balance Act’ is both good politics and good policy.”

These powerful groups were joined in their opposition to a Boehner deal by many influential Republicans: on August 1, Senator and Tea Party Caucus member Jim DeMint expressed his anger over the impending deal to raise the debt ceiling by renegeing his promise to stop financing primary challenges with his Senate Conservative Fund; they were also joined in opposition to a deal by every Republican candidate running for the Presidential nomination except Jon Huntsman.

From the very beginning, Republican leaders in the House of Representatives were determined to use the nation’s borrowing limit as leverage to demand heavy spending cuts from the Democrats.²⁵ The GOP leadership pushed the argument that the debt ceiling should only be raised in exchange for a revenue-neutral reduction in the federal deficit. Although Republican

leaders in both the House and Senate frequently assured businesses and markets that they understood the

gravity of the situation, there was a significant number of House Republicans who had no interest in preserving America’s ability to borrow money and pay its debts.²⁶ While Republicans’ denial about the looming possibility of default may have been useful in negotiations, the public came to see Republicans in Congress as quixotic and irresponsible.

The conviction discourse espoused by advocacy groups and the Republican establishment had

clearly been effective in convincing the public that immediate retrenchment was absolutely necessary if a crisis similar to the one escalating in Europe was to be avoided, but it had failed to convince many voters that raising revenue would be a death-knell to the fragile recovery. By July, numerous polls suggested that the public was ready for a compromise which included a revenue-raising component. Early in the month, a Gallup Poll estimated that only 20 percent of Americans, 23 percent of independents, and 26 percent of Republicans wanted to bring down the deficit “only with spending cuts,” with 68 percent of Republicans willing to accept “at least some” tax increases.²⁷ A *Washington Post* poll conducted July 14 to 17 found 54 percent of Republicans in favor of raising taxes on incomes over \$250 thousand and 55 percent favored increases in taxes on oil and gas companies (proposed by Democrats).²⁸ In a sample conducted by University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation asking citizens to make specific decisions about deficit reduction, on average, Republicans opted to increase revenues more than cut spending (an average of \$230 billion to \$101, respectively).²⁹

After a barrage of warnings from international and domestic business, policy, academic, and policy experts, popular opposition to raising the debt ceiling dissipated with the new awareness of the dangers of default. From late May to early June, Pew found a consistent number of respondents who were more fearful of raising the debt ceiling than failing to do so (Republicans actually increased to 66 percent),³⁰ but by late July public sentiments had changed dramatically. A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll found only 18 percent of Americans remained skeptical that failure to raise the ceiling would cause real and serious problems with 55 percent saying that it would. At the same time, a *Washington Post*/ABC poll found that 64 percent of those who strongly supported the Tea Party believed that the economy would be damaged, and 58 percent of Republican voters saw Republicans in Congress as too resistant to reaching a deal.³¹ With 65 percent of independents favoring deficit reduction through a mix of spending cuts and tax hikes, Republicans in

Congress were not basing their “theological” strategy on public opinion.³²

Despite last-minute efforts of the GOP leadership (including Tea Party hero Paul Ryan) to impress the potential for disastrous consequences of default upon their rank-and-file, members affiliated with the Tea Party refused to compromise. Former GOP presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani suggested that President Obama was asking these representatives to “commit suicide” and explained that freshmen Republicans were unwilling to break the “solemn promise” against raising taxes that had gotten them elected.³³ However, the fear of “serious consequences at the ballot box for Republicans blinking on [the] issue” was not coming from senior leadership or polling data but from numerous threats of primary challenges.³⁴

In the end, hopes for a “grand bargain” were unceremoniously dashed. Weeks of negotiations and arm-twisting could not marshal sufficient Republican support for any plan which raised additional revenue. Instead, the debt ceiling was raised with minor cuts in government spending and no new revenue while a Congressional “supercommittee” was tasked with reaching a suitable compromise. Across the board spending cuts (“sequestration”) undesirable for both parties were established as part of a “trigger” to ensure that this committee fulfilled its responsibilities. As promised, this display of “governance and policymaking becoming less stable, less effective, and less predictable” lead Standard & Poor’s Credit Rating Agency to downgrade America’s credit rating from AAA to AA+.³⁵

What this means for 2012

Speaking on the origins of polarization between America’s parties, former Republican Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert observed that “the far wings” have become the people with “the money that help people get elected.”³⁶ The “incredible amounts of money” now available to third party groups has allowed these new influences unprecedented power in shaping the political discourse. Not only has this introduced

new players, but it has also marked an encroachment onto the traditional preserve of parties, leading John McCain to warn that independent expenditures are “making parties irrelevant.”³⁷ This is coming at a particularly bad time for the Republican Party. In the previous elections, independents have played a determinate role in elections, and this is not expected to change in the foreseeable future.³⁸ In January, a Gallup poll found that a record 40 percent of Americans identified as Independents, more than identified as Democrats (31 percent) or Republicans (27 percent). Mitt Romney’s top adviser Eric Fehrnstrom drew attention to this problem in his notorious statement that once Romney received the nomination the campaign would “hit a reset button” and “start all over again” (“like an Etch a Sketch”) with a new discourse to appeal to moderates and independents.³⁹

The battle for the GOP presidential nomination has already shown that conviction groups have not changed their priorities. In the presidential arena, massive individual donors have emerged intent on propping up individual candidates using Super-PAC donations, frequently dwarfing the amounts of money spent by the candidates themselves and doing so with no regard to the projections about the candidate’s performance in the general election.⁴⁰ There is considerable evidence that the vicious and extended fight over the Republican presidential nomination has eroded support for Republican candidates among Republican voters as well as Independents, while the heightened rhetoric has served to excite the Democratic base and improve public opinion about the Democratic Party (in March 2012, the Democratic Party was viewed favorably by 49 percent of poll respondents compared to the GOP’s 36 percent).⁴¹ President Obama is now the only presidential candidate at the 50 percent approval level, and among independent voters in the last four months there has been a 19 percent swing in Obama’s favor in a matchup with front-runner Mitt Romney. As Romney has worked tirelessly to promote himself as a “severe conservative,” since January his unfavorable rating among independents has jumped 9 points, while 2012 has seen President Obama’s job

approval rating steadily climbing.⁴² From November 2011 through March 2012, Obama’s favorability rating has increased substantially while that of the Republican candidates has fallen, and an increasing amount of Republicans polled are saying that the primary is “bad for the party.”⁴³ In the last six months, polls have also seen Republican and Tea Party excitement steadily drop while Democrats get more anxious to make their voices heard in November.⁴⁴

In the 2012 elections, these forces will continue to operate in defense of their principled objectives (with more experience and funding) but with less regard to popular sentiments than the Republican establishment might hope. Unless they are willing to fight against these groups, the GOP will have to consider the sentiments of moneyed activist networks, and Republican candidates beholden to conviction networks (whether by force of conviction or contributions) will be forced at times to take unpopular stances making them more well-financed but less electable. This, in conjunction with the unprecedented unpopularity which conviction-based partisan gridlock has earned Congress,⁴⁵ may result in unusually high turnover rates for some of the candidates who were swept in on the wave of support for the Tea Party seen in 2010. The unrestricted amounts of money from individuals and now corporations suggest these conviction groups will continue to be a formidable force in American politics.

Although in recent elections Republican candidates have enjoyed access to a new source of funding, the growing influence of outside groups on American politics may end up harming the Republican Party and its candidates more than helping them. So far, the GOP has seen its ability to impose compromises on its members reduced, as new sources of funding and primary threats create a disincentive to cooperation. The inability of campaigns to coordinate with conviction groups has also been problematic. Parallel campaigns have inundated districts with telephone calls, causing redundancies and aggravating voters, and PAC donors and representatives often speak on behalf of the candidates they support, making official

campaigns appear responsible for content and statements they did not approve.⁴⁶ In the long-term, these changes in the system will force corresponding changes in partisan strategies. Unless Democrats become subject to similar pressures, they will be in a position to choose whether to aim their discourse at capturing moderates and independents or retreating to their ideological base. Regardless of the impact on Democrats, these influences will continue to act on the Republican Party for the foreseeable future, forcing party members to defend the priorities of the far right wings, and promising more gridlock and growing public dissatisfaction with Congress as an institution.

Author

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¹¹ Ibid.

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¹³ Colin Hay, "The Discourse of Globalisation and the Logic of No Alternative: Rendering the Contingent Necessary in the Political Economy of New Labour," *Policy and Politics* 31 (2003): 289-305.

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¹⁵ "Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 18, 2010, Internet (accessed June 15, 2011).

¹⁶ "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, May 4, 2011, Internet (accessed February 18, 2012).

¹⁷ Gary Jacobson, "The Republican Resurgence in 2010," *Political Science Quarterly* 126 (2011): 27-52.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Beyond Red vs. Blue."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Paul Blumenthal, "Outside Spending," The Center for Responsive Politics, 2010, Internet (accessed February 23, 2012).

²² In an interview during his recruitment efforts, McCarthy had discussed seeing the Tea Party and its followers as allies, saying "We can't sit back and think we have all the right ideas ... We have to be able to come up with an agenda that will unite everyone. I think we have the principles that do that from this idea of fiscal responsibility."

²³ Jacobson (2011) provides evidence of how the passionate conservative reaction against Obama

fostered a "highly nationalized election," which became "a referendum on Obama and the unified Democratic government."

²⁴ Bill Kristol specifically suggested Ryan run for President because of his success in "uniting the establishment and Tea Party wings of the GOP."

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²⁷ Jeffrey Jones, "On Deficit, Americans Prefer Spending Cuts; Open to Tax Hikes," Gallup, July 13, 2011, Internet (accessed July 13, 2011).

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³⁵ “United States of America Long-Term Rating Lowered To 'AA+' Due To Political Risks, Rising Debt Burden; Outlook Negative,” Standard and Poors, August 5, 2011, Internet (accessed August 5, 2011).

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