



## Choosing America's Future - An Election that Matters

OCTOBER 2, 2012

With Democrats and Republicans pointing in opposite directions, the choices U.S. voters make on November 6, 2012 will help set the nation's course at home and abroad. SSN experts assess President Obama's record and dissect the clashing agendas of the two major parties.

### THE BIG PICTURE

An election with high stakes has special significance for young adults – whose lives will unfold in the kind of economy and society Americans build in this decade. [Richard F. Doner](#) of Emory University outlines [the clear choices young Americans face in the 2012 elections](#). He contrasts the records and proposals of Democrats and Republicans on a range of relevant issues – paying for college; jobs and economic advancement; affordable health care; social equality; bringing down the national debt; and protecting the right to vote.

SSN Director [Theda Skocpol](#) has a new book on *Obama and America's Political Future* (Harvard University Press, 2012), which probes the accomplishments and political struggles of President Barack Obama's first term. Skocpol and [Lawrence Jacobs](#) also published "[Accomplished and Embattled: Understanding Obama's Presidency](#)" in the *Political Science Quarterly* earlier this year. Why have the President's major policy accomplishments provoked and mobilized political enemies, while often leaving supporters mystified or disappointed? Skocpol and Jacobs examine the economic crisis, partisan extremism, and media dynamics that have profoundly shaped Obama's effort to create a second New Deal – and Skocpol also discusses the rise of the Tea Party and the radicalization of the Republican Party. SSN member [Suzanne Mettler](#) contributes one of three commentaries included in the Harvard Press book. Skocpol's analysis and Mettler's commentary were praised in a recent column by Reuters correspondent Chrystia Freeland. Last spring, Theda Skocpol gave a lengthy interview to the British publication *Juncture* about [why the 2012 election is shaping up to be one of the most important in U.S. history](#).

### KEY ELECTION ISSUES

The personalities and aims of the 2012 presidential contenders could hardly be more different, and Republicans and Democrats offer different visions of what government should (and should not) do in every major policy realm.

#### > The role of government in expanding economic opportunities

Americans are often wary of "big government," but they also [want government to take an active role in promoting equal opportunities for all](#), as the research of [Lawrence Jacobs](#) of the University of Minnesota has convincingly documented. In 2012, the two parties and their presidential contenders offer sharply different visions for what government should – and should not – do to shape a more vibrant economy that allows everyone to reap the fruits of growth.

President Obama and most Democrats call for the federal government to step up investments in job creation, infrastructure renewal, and education and research – with an emphasis on tax and spending measures that benefit the middle class. Democrats also support existing and new measures to bolster wages and improve job opportunities – along the lines outlined by [Paul Osterman](#) of MIT in his brief on what could be done to

[improve American jobs.](#)

The Obama Labor Department is using its administrative powers to pursue measures such as the [new regulations protecting home care workers](#) described by [Sandra Butler](#) of the University of Maine. Although many rank and file Democrats have been disappointed that the Obama administration was unable to persuade Congress to pass legislation bolstering union rights, the administration has taken regulatory and enforcement steps that would be quickly dropped or reversed in a Romney administration.

Overall, the GOP approach to the economy would not only rule out most new policies apart from tax cuts and de-regulation, it would also roll back the federal government to levels not seen since the 1950s. Republicans led by Mitt Romney have endorsed the outlines of massive new tax cuts and sharp retrenchments in domestic spending charted by Congressman Paul Ryan, Romney's vice-presidential running mate and the leader of the GOP House Budget Committee. Big business and the wealthy would see yet-higher incomes and more freedom of maneuver, but for most middle-class and lower-income Americans, the Ryan plan would bring constricted opportunities, reduced social security, and higher taxes. That is the assessment of [Jacob Hacker](#) of Yale University and [Paul Pierson](#) of the University of California at Berkeley in their [brief analyzing the Ryan blueprint](#). Despite drastic reductions in federal domestic spending, the Ryan approach would also leave federal deficits in place at least until 2040. In August 2012, [SSN did a Spotlight on the Ryan budget](#) with more than a dozen briefs dissecting its likely impact on the nation, major social groups, and a number of individual states. By any assessment, the Ryan plan championed by today's GOP is a radical effort to hobble government as a positive force in expanding economic opportunity and social security.

### > Investments in new industries and sources of energy

In a second Obama administration, we could expect a continuation and perhaps intensification of federal encouragement of green energy production and innovative American manufacturing. [Eban Goodstein](#) of Bard College contrasts Obama administration efforts to spur wind and solar power with the [determination of Mitt Romney and his party to eliminate federal subsidies that encourage these new green energies](#), while doubling down on traditional subsidies for the coal and petroleum industries. [Fred Block](#) of the University of California at Davis and [Matthew Keller](#) of Southern Methodist University underline that the U.S. government has a [history of spurring marketable innovations](#). Republican calls to drastically retrench federal involvements in encouraging economic growth and new industries would likely hurt the future vitality of the national economy in an increasingly competitive world.

### > Education

The two presidential candidates and their parties also have strong differences about the federal role in education. President Obama places a high priority on making college more affordable and reforming as well as supporting education for youngsters from birth through high school. As [John Dorrer](#) of Jobs for the Future explains in his SSN brief, the Obama administration is also taking the lead in trying to [eliminate abuses by commercial career training programs](#) that often encourage students to run up big debts but do not deliver promised skills and job opportunities. A Republican administration would drop such regulatory efforts. In addition, the Republican-backed Ryan budget calls for major retrenchment in federal spending for higher education as well as for large cuts in Head Start for preschoolers and in federal support for school programs aimed at low-income and disabled children. [Lynne Miller](#) of the University of Southern Maine spells out the details of [how the Ryan budget would undercut American Education](#).

### > Health Care

Nowhere do Republicans and Democrats differ more sharply in 2012 than in their proposals about health insurance and strategies for controlling rising costs in U.S. health care. The contrasting party agendas for health reform, Medicaid, and Medicare – and a range of other issues about the future of American health care at stake in this election – are explored in a rich variety of SSN briefs included in the October [SSN Spotlight on "The High Stakes for Health Care in Election 2012."](#)

## > Safety Net Programs

Should Republicans win the presidency and both houses of Congress in November 2012, the most immediate impacts of GOP budget and spending plans would land on an array of federal programs that serve low-income families and channel resources to religious and nonprofit charities that serve the poor. In a compelling brief, [Scott Allard](#) of the University of Chicago details [how the Ryan-GOP approach would devastate low-income families](#). Allard also offers a companion brief explaining that [nonprofit and religious charities would be hurt, too](#). Conservative rhetoric about budget cuts often implies that private charities will be able to fill the gaps when government spending on the poor is cut back. But, in fact, as Allard argues, nonprofit social service agencies and religious charities rely on significant government appropriations to keep their doors open and meet pressing human needs in economically struggling cities and rural areas.

## > Immigration Reform

Despite efforts at bipartisanship in the past, in this election season, Republicans and Democrats have taken largely opposite stands on immigration reform – above all on the question of what should happen to the roughly eleven million undocumented newcomers who work and live in communities across the United States. Republicans for the most part oppose any sort of "amnesty" or path to legal citizenship – except for undocumented immigrants who have served in the U.S. military. But President Obama and many Democrats favor moving toward legalization, starting with undocumented young adults who were originally brought to the country as children. [Robert Glover](#) of the University of Maine explains the preliminary administrative steps the Obama administration has taken, and discusses [the future of the DREAM Act](#) legislation supported by President Obama as a way to allow undocumented young people to work and go to college and earn the opportunity to apply for full citizenship.

## > Women's Issues

The 2012 clash about federal spending and budget plans has a special resonance for many middle-class and lower-income women, as [Ann Orloff](#) and [Christine Percheski](#) of Northwestern University explain in their brief about the [impact of the Ryan budget on women](#). Rights to make reproductive decisions and access to affordable contraception are also on the line in 2012, because Republicans are making concerted efforts to render abortion illegal and eliminate subsidies for contraceptive care. This, too, is an [economic issue for many women and their families](#), as [Carole Joffe](#) of the University of California at San Francisco explains in her informative brief. Many other 2012 issues are of special concern to particular groups of American women. SSN scholars explored all of the stakes in our [September 2012 Spotlight on "Women in Election 2012 – Issues and Voters."](#)