

This Presidential Race Should Never Have Been This Close

Matt Taibbi, Rolling Stone Magazine - 26 September 2012

The press everywhere is buzzing this week with premature obituaries of the Romney campaign. New polls are out suggesting that Mitt Romney's electoral path to the presidency is all but blocked. Unless someone snags an iPhone video of Obama taking a leak on Ohio State mascot Brutus Buckeye, or stealing pain meds from a Tampa retiree and sharing them with a bunch of Japanese carmakers, the game looks pretty much up – Obama's widening leads in three battleground states, Virginia, Ohio and Florida, seem to have sealed the deal.

That's left the media to speculate, with a palpable air of sadness, over where the system went wrong. Whatever you believe, many of these articles say, wherever you rest on the ideological spectrum, you should be disappointed that Obama ultimately had to run against such an incompetent challenger. Weirdly, there seems to be an expectation that presidential races should be closer, and that if one doesn't come down to the wire in an exciting photo finish, we've all missed out somehow.

Frank Bruni of The New York Times wrote a thoughtful, insightful editorial today that blames the painful, repetitive and vacuous campaign process for thinning the electoral herd and leaving us with only automatons and demented narcissists willing to climb the mountain:

Romney's bleeding has plenty to do with his intrinsic shortcomings and his shortsightedness: how does a man who has harbored presidential ambitions almost since he was a zygote create a paper trail of offshore accounts and tax returns like his?

But I wonder if we're not seeing the worst possible version of him, and if it isn't the ugly flower of the process itself. I wonder, too, what the politicians mulling 2016 make of it, and whether, God help us, we'll be looking at an even worse crop of candidates then.

The Times, meanwhile, ran a house editorial blaming Romney's general obliqueness, his willingness to stretch the truth and his inability to connect with ordinary people for his fall. David Brooks ran a column suggesting that Romney's over-reliance on a message of strict market conservatism, ignoring the values message of "traditional" conservatism, was what killed him in the end.

All of these points of view have merit, I guess, but to me they're mostly irrelevant. The mere fact that Mitt Romney is even within striking distance of winning this election is an incredible testament to two things: a) the rank incompetence of the Democratic Party, which would have this and every other election for the next half century sewn up if they were a little less money-hungry and tried just a little harder to represent their ostensible constituents, and b) the power of our propaganda machine, which has conditioned all of us to accept the idea that the American population, ideologically speaking, is naturally split down the middle, whereas the real fault lines are a lot closer to the 99-1 ratio the Occupy movement has been talking about since last year.

Think about it. Four years ago, we had an economic crash that wiped out somewhere between a quarter to 40% of the world's wealth, depending on whom you believe. The crash was caused by an utterly disgusting and irresponsible class of Wall Street paper-pushers who loaded the world up with deadly leverage in pursuit of their own bonuses, then ran screaming to the government for a handout (and got it) the instant it all went south.

These people represent everything that ordinarily repels the American voter. They mostly come from privileged backgrounds. Few of them have ever worked with their hands, or done anything like hard work. They not only don't oppose the offshoring of American manufacturing jobs, they enthusiastically support it, financing the construction of new factories in places like China and India.

They've relentlessly lobbied the government to give themselves tax holidays and shelters, and have succeeded at turning the graduated income tax idea on its head by getting the IRS to accept a sprawling buffet of absurd semantic precepts, like the notions that "capital gains" and "carried interest" are somehow not the same as "income."

The people in this group inevitably support every war that America has even the slimmest chance of involving itself in, but neither they nor their children ever fight in these conflicts. They are largely irreligious and incidentally they do massive amounts of drugs, from cocaine on down, but almost never suffer any kind of criminal penalty for their behavior.

That last thing I would say is probably appropriate, except for the fact that hundreds of thousands of poor (and mostly black and Hispanic) kids get tossed by cops every year (would you believe 684,000 street stops in New York alone in 2011?) in the same city where Wall Street's finest work, and those kids do real time for possession of anything from a marijuana stem to an empty vial. How many Wall Street guys would you think would fill the jails if the police spent even one day doing aggressive, no-leniency stop-and-frisk checks outside the bars in lower Manhattan? How many Lortabs and Adderalls and little foil-wraps of coke or E would pop out of those briefcases?

For all this, when it came time to nominate a candidate for the presidency four years after the crash, the Republicans chose a man who in almost every respect perfectly represents this class of people. Mitt Romney is a rich-from-birth Ivy League product who not only has never done a hard day of work in his life – he never even saw a bad neighborhood in America until 1996, when he was 49 years old, when he went into some seedy sections of New York in search of a colleague's missing daughter ("It was a shocker," Mitt said. "The number of lost souls was astounding").

He has a \$250 million fortune, but he appears to pay well under half the maximum tax rate, thanks to those absurd semantic distinctions that even Ronald Reagan dismissed as meaningless and counterproductive. He has used offshore tax havens for himself and his wife, and his company, Bain Capital, has both eliminated jobs in the name of efficiency (often using these cuts to pay for payments to his own company) and moved American jobs overseas.

The point is, Mitt Romney's natural constituency should be about 1% of the population. If you restrict that pool to "likely voters," he might naturally appeal to 2%. Maybe 3%.

If the clichés are true and the presidential race always comes down to which candidate the American people "wants to have a beer with," how many Americans will choose to sit at the bar with the coiffed Wall Street multimillionaire who fires your sister, unapologetically pays half your tax rate, keeps his money stashed in Cayman Islands partnerships or Swiss accounts in his wife's name, cheerfully encourages finance-industry bailouts while bashing "entitlements" like Medicare, waves a pom-pom while your kids go fight and die in hell-holes like Afghanistan and Iraq and generally speaking has never even visited the country that most of the rest of us call the United States, except to make sure that it's paying its bills to him on time?

Romney is an almost perfect amalgam of all the great out-of-touch douchebags of our national cinema: he's Gregg Marmalaard from Animal House mixed with Billy Zane's sneering, tux-wearing Cal character in Titanic to pussy-ass Prince Humperdinck to Roy Stalin to Gordon Gekko (he's literally Gordon Gekko). He's everything we've been trained to despise, the guy who had everything handed to him, doesn't fight his own battles and insists there's only room in the lifeboat for himself – and yet the Democrats, for some reason, have had terrible trouble beating him in a popularity contest.

The fact that Barack Obama needed a Himalayan mountain range of cash and some rather extreme last-minute incompetence on Romney's part to pull safely ahead in this race is what really speaks to the brokenness of this system. Bruni of the Times is right that the process scares away qualified candidates who could have given Obama a better run for all that money. But what he misses is that the brutal campaign process, with its two years of nearly constant media abuse and "gotcha" watch-dogging, serves mainly to select out any candidate who is considered anything like a threat to the corrupt political establishment – and that selection process is the only thing that has kept this race close.

Barack Obama is hardly a complete Wall Street stooge. The country's most powerful bankers seem genuinely to hate his guts, mainly because they're delusional and are sincerely offended by anyone who dares to even generally criticize them for being greedy or ethically suspect, as Obama has with his occasional broadsides against "fat cat bankers" and so on.

On the other hand, Obama's policy choices in the last four years have made it impossible for him to run aggressively against the corruption and greed and generally self-obsessed, almost cinematic douchiness that Romney represents.

With 300 million possible entrants in the race, how did we end up with two guys who would both refuse to bring a single case against a Wall Street bank during a period of epic corruption? How did we end up with two guys who refuse to repeal the carried-interest tax break? How did we end with two guys who supported a vast program of bailouts with virtually no conditions attached to them? Citigroup has had so many people running policy in the Obama White House, they should open a branch in the Roosevelt

Room. It's not as bad as it would be in a Romney presidency, but it comes close.

If this race had even one guy running in it who didn't take money from all the usual quarters and actually represented the economic interests of ordinary people, it wouldn't be close. It shouldn't be close. If one percent of the country controls forty percent of the country's wealth – and that trend is moving rapidly in the direction of more inequality with each successive year – what kind of split should we have, given that at least one of the candidates enthusiastically and unapologetically represents the interests of that one percent?

To me the biggest reason the split isn't bigger is the news media, which wants a close race mainly for selfish commercial reasons – it's better theater and sells more ads. Most people in the news business have been conditioned to believe that national elections should be close.

This conditioning leads to all sorts of problems and journalistic mischief, like a tendency of pundits to give equal weight to opposing views in situations where one of those views is actually completely moronic and illegitimate, a similar tendency to overlook or downplay glaring flaws in a candidate just because one of the two major parties has blessed him or her with its support (Sarah Palin is a classic example), and the more subtly dangerous tendency to describe races as "hotly contested" or "neck and neck" in nearly all situations regardless of reality, which not only has the effect of legitimizing both candidates but leaves people with the mistaken impression that the candidates are fierce ideological opposites, when in fact they aren't, or at least aren't always. This last media habit is the biggest reason that we don't hear about the areas where candidates like Romney and Obama agree, which come mostly in the hardcore economic issues.

It's obviously simplistic to say that in a country where the wealth divide is as big as it is in America, elections should always be landslide victories for the candidate who represents the broke-and-struggling sector of the population. All sorts of non-economic factors, from social issues to the personal magnetism of the candidates, can tighten the races. And just because someone happens to represent the very rich, well, that doesn't automatically disqualify him or her from higher office; he or she might have a vision for the whole country that is captivating (such a candidacy, however, would be more feasible during a time when the very rich were less completely besotted with corruption).

But when one of the candidates is Mitt Romney, the race shouldn't be close. You'll hear differently in the coming weeks from the news media, which will spend a lot of time scratching its figurative beard while it argues that a 54-46 split, or however this thing ends up (and they'll call anything above 53% for Obama a rout, I would guess), is evidence that the system is broken. But what we probably should be wondering is why it was ever close at all.



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