

The Voice of Russia

Economic crisis sours Obama's "change"

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Barack Obama. Photo: EPA

President Obama's popularity is falling and the Republicans who are responsible for the current economic mess may make a comeback we spoke to Ted Galen Carpenter the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute about this and received his candid and as always forthright responses to this and more.

I wanted to ask you how do you see the whole situation because there were some comments coming that Mr. Obama's rating was falling very low. But then I saw some more optimistic comments. What is the truth?

It is very difficult to say. Elections are inherently unpredictable in this country. The most likely scenario is that election night will be bad for the Democrats, probably something short of a catastrophe. In other words, Democrats will probably lose control of the House of Representatives and probably retain the control of the Senate but with reduced majority. In terms of foreign policy, probably the biggest impact of the election will be the prospect of a new START Treaty. That was going to be a difficult ratification fight even with the composition of the current Senate. With a Senate that is going to be more republican the prospect of ratification even more remote.

Mr. Carpenter, what was it that brought Obama's rating so low. Was it mostly issues of domestic policy or was it foreign policy?

Overwhelmingly domestic policy. When voters are asked to select the most important issue or two or three important issues even the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rarely make the top ten issues. All the top issues tend to be domestic issues with the state of the economy being the Number One issue and then the health care reform which is the Number Two issue. General foreign policy is hardly on the radar screen at all, in terms of these elections.

How typical is that for mid-term US elections? What is the choice of high-priority issues?

Reasonably, typical domestic politics tend to dominate. But the degree of dominance of domestic issues in this election is unusual. Normally, at least one or two foreign policy issues can make to top five or six in terms of importance to voters. This time really not. The focus is overwhelmingly on domestic concerns.

How would you explain that?

Primarily, it is the state of the economy. Americans are enduring one of the worst economic situations that we

have had at least from the 1980s and arguably since the Great Depression of the 1930s. They are worried, they are insecure and they are rather upset that the economy has become this bad and remains this bad.

But, Mr. Carpenter, if we go way back into history, it is not Mr. Obama who is to blame. It all started several years ago before Obama became President.

Which is a point that the Democratic Party is making in their campaign. Voters tend to have short memories and they hold the current policy makers accountable for conditions in the country, whether good or bad. And one might argue that it is a bit unfair to hold Obama and the Democrats entirely responsible for the economy. But it is also true that it has been over a year and a half since the President and his party took office and the economy really has not gone better. In some measurements it has even gone worse. So it is not surprising that voters are impatient and want progress. And they are upset with the party that controls both the White House and Congress.

Are the Republicans suggesting they have a recipe of success that could bring the economy up in less than a year's term?

The Republicans are focusing their campaign overwhelmingly on criticism of the Democrats and their handling of policies. Some Republican candidates do offer at least general outlines of an alternative but they have not really stressed that at all. The message in the campaign after campaign is what the Democrats have done wrong, not necessarily what the Republicans will propose to do differently that would be better.

That is their soft point, is it not?

It is an effective campaign strategy and, whether we like it or not, negative campaigning tends to succeed much more than positive campaigning. I was reading a news story just this morning in which both parties' campaign advisors are telling candidates that positive ads emphasizing what the candidate has done well either in the private sector or in office are a waste of money, that voters are not in the mood to hear about that, as one campaign strategist put it to a candidate, you would do more good giving that money to charity than you would by running a positive ad. So the country is in a very irritated and angry mood right now.

If we move outwards of the system of parties there are some brilliant economists, Nobel Prize winners. Are they coming up with any recipes of theirs?

Certainly, we get proposals from economists of various economical persuasions. Some of these ideas may be very hard to tell. But politics tend to govern policy decisions in the government, not necessarily from the economic standpoint a particular policy might be a good idea. Though they may be very intelligent people their influence is not very great at this point.

What would you suggest, Mr. Carpenter? How would you handle the situation? How would you take the country out of this irritated mood to some more constructive discussions?

I am not an expert on politics and that almost belongs to the area of collective psychology. And I am definitely not an expert in that. It is very obvious right now that the country is in an angrier mood than at any time I have seen, probably since late 1960s - early 1970s during the final stages of Lyndon Johnson's administration and the first turn of President Nixon's administration. That anger was generated primarily because of the conflict over the Vietnam War. The origin of that anger was different but the degree of animosity in the country is rather similar to what I saw then. I really have not seen it to that degree in the forty some years since that earlier period.

Do you think that passions might die away if Democrats lose and Republicans win?

I think these tensions are likely to go on for some time. The best thing that could ease tensions would be to see the unemployment rate drop from the current 9.6%, and if you count in underemployed people and people who have given up working you are talking of more like 16-17%, if that could drop to a normal level of 4.5-5.5%, the public mood would improve dramatically regardless to who is in power.

Thank you very much, Mr. Carpenter. It was very interesting talking to you, as usual.