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The Real Referendum

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Republicans came into this campaign believing that it would be a referendum on President Obama, and that still-high unemployment would hand them victory on a silver platter. But given the usual caveats — a month can be a long time in politics, it's not over until the votes are actually counted, and so on — it doesn't seem to be turning out that way.

Yet there is a sense in which the election is indeed a referendum, but of a different kind. Voters are, in effect, being asked to deliver a verdict on the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society, on Social Security, Medicare and, yes, Obamacare, which represents an extension of that legacy. Will they vote for politicians who want to replace Medicare with Vouchercare, who denounce Social Security as “collectivist” (as Paul Ryan once did), who dismiss those who turn to social insurance programs as people unwilling to take responsibility for their lives?

If the polls are any indication, the result of that referendum will be a clear reassertion of support for the safety net, and a clear rejection of politicians who want to return us to the Gilded Age. But here's the question: Will that election result be honored?

I ask that question because we already know what Mr. Obama will face if re-elected: a clamor from Beltway insiders demanding that he immediately return to his failed political strategy of 2011, in which he made a Grand Bargain over the budget deficit his overriding priority. Now is the time, he'll be told, to fix America's entitlement problem once and for all. There will be calls — as there were at the time of the Democratic National Convention — for him to officially endorse Simpson-Bowles, the budget proposal issued by the co-chairmen of his deficit commission (although never accepted by the commission as a whole).

And Mr. Obama should just say no, for three reasons.

First, despite years of dire warnings from people like, well, Alan Simpson and Erskine Bowles, we are not facing any kind of fiscal crisis. Indeed, U.S. borrowing costs are at historic lows, with investors actually willing to pay the government for the privilege of owning inflation-protected bonds. So reducing the budget deficit just isn't the top priority for America at the moment; creating jobs is. For now, the administration's political capital should be devoted to passing something like last year's American Jobs Act and providing effective mortgage debt relief.

Second, contrary to Beltway conventional wisdom, America does not have an “entitlements problem.” Mainly, it has a health cost problem, private as well as public, which must be addressed (and which the Affordable Care Act at least starts to address). It's true that there's also, even aside from health care, a gap between the services we're promising and the taxes we're collecting — but to call that gap an “entitlements” issue is already to accept the very right-wing frame that voters appear to be in the process of rejecting.

Finally, despite the bizarre reverence it inspires in Beltway insiders — the same people, by the way, who assured us that Paul Ryan was a brave truth-teller — the fact is that Simpson-Bowles is a really bad plan, one

that would undermine some key pieces of our safety net. And if a re-elected president were to endorse it, he would be betraying the trust of the voters who returned him to office.

Consider, in particular, the proposal to raise the Social Security retirement age, supposedly to reflect rising life expectancy. This is an idea Washington loves — but it's also totally at odds with the reality of an America in which rising inequality is reflected not just in the quality of life but in its duration. For while average life expectancy has indeed risen, that increase is confined to the relatively well-off and well-educated — the very people who need Social Security least. Meanwhile, life expectancy is actually falling for a substantial part of the nation.

Now, there's no mystery about why Simpson-Bowles looks the way it does. It was put together in a political environment in which progressives, and even supporters of the safety net as we know it, were very much on the defensive — an environment in which conservatives were presumed to be in the ascendant, and in which bipartisanship was effectively defined as the effort to broker deals between the center-right and the hard right.

Barring an upset, however, that environment will come to an end on Nov. 6. This election is, as I said, shaping up as a referendum on our social insurance system, and it looks as if Mr. Obama will emerge with a clear mandate for preserving and extending that system. It would be a terrible mistake, both politically and for the nation's future, for him to let himself be talked into snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.