

## **Governing After Over-Promising**

For almost anyone following closely our presidential candidates' statements, it is absolutely clear that each pledges more than he can deliver. As a result, we must vote for the candidate who can better govern after over-promising.

Consider especially the big three items driving upward the budget deficits: growth in health costs, growth in retirement costs, and the tax cuts that keep passing our bills and related interest costs onto future generations. One simply can't balance the long-term budget without dealing with these three. Yet both Obama and Romney remain largely silent about what we might have to give up in these arenas for years to come.

Social Security reform? "[We can easily tweak the Social Security program while protecting current beneficiaries, ensuring that it's there for future generations,](#)" President Obama says. "[\[I am not\] proposing any changes for any current retirees or near retirees, either to Social Security or Medicare,](#)" Governor Romney proclaimed at the first presidential debate.

Medicare? The president fights to retain long-run hopes for "[well over \\$1 trillion](#)" in cost savings that he thinks are in Obamacare. But the Congressional Budget Office says that Obamacare raises health costs overall and that any long-run savings are just that, long-run, as well as uncertain. Romney would replace Obamacare and restore additional Medicare-directed spending. CBO numbers say that simply abandoning Obamacare would add to the deficit since the bill also includes tax increases and other measures that more than offset the health cost increases.

As for premium support or vouchers versus traditional Medicare, the candidates do engage in a debate, but generally over changes that would be phased in at some time long distant from when they need to tackle the deficit.

Taxes? Romney proclaims that his reform would reduce revenues or at best be revenue neutral: "[We are not going to have high-income people pay less of the tax burden than they pay today. \[...\] I do want to bring taxes down for middle-income people.](#)" He would also cut tax rates by 20 percent and "keep revenue up by limiting deductions and exemptions," or perhaps he would do less, if those limits don't supply enough revenues. Obama, in turn, holds with his promise from the last campaign for [no tax increases for anyone making less than \\$250,000](#). Analysis after analysis shows that keeping this promise would force only modest progress on the deficit.

Discretionary spending? Although not one of the big three drivers of our budgetary problems, both candidates would pare it dramatically as a share of GDP, but their campaigns only emphasize what they would protect. Obama would invest in education, and Romney now likes Pell grants, though he would give Big Bird some liposuction. Romney says he would somehow maintain a higher defense budget than Obama.

These candidates are not the first to try to tell us how much they will do for us or at least how they will absolve us--particularly the woe begotten middle class--from sharing in any future budgetary fix. Their complication, even compared with previous presidential elections, is that their new promises stack onto an extraordinary and unprecedented number of unsustainable promises already put into law. I understand why they are scared to death to tell us what reforms might really be required; we voters often jump on the honest candidate and, hence, bear some responsibility for what we get. But that means that in deciding for whom to vote, we must speculate on just which pledges either candidate would violate.

Should we prefer the candidate more willing to declare "oops" once elected?

Do we vote for the one whose future contradictions we believe will be less likely to affect our favorite interests?

Do we favor the politician more adept at dissimulating his past statements?

Consider many of the recent budget agreements and systemic reforms that required us to give up something. Reagan abandoned his opposition to removing tax breaks both in the budget agreements and the major tax reform legislation he signed. He also reversed his previously successful efforts to provide zero and often negative tax rates on some investments. Clinton abandoned his pledge for a tax cut soon after being elected. George H.W. Bush famously abandoned his "no new taxes" pledge. And while poor H.W.'s dissimulation efforts were unsuccessful, conservative and liberal pundits still place Reagan and Clinton high in their respective pantheons.

The president is the only elected official who represents all the American people. The office demands a higher order of integrity and just plain arithmetic discipline than does the role of candidate. In the end, therefore, we probably pick whomever we think better recognizes that the switch from candidate to president is more of a leap than a transition.

---

**The Government We Deserve** is a periodic column on public policy by Eugene Steuerle, an Institute fellow and the Richard B. Fisher Chair at the nonpartisan Urban Institute. Steuerle is also a former deputy assistant secretary of the Treasury. The opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its sponsors.

*Note to Editors:* Publication of this column is encouraged and permission is hereby granted, provided that the author is properly cited. To make comments, visit the blog at <http://blog.governmentweddeserve.org/2012/10/18/governing-after-over-promising/>.