

Opinion: Presidential candidates lacking big ideas

By Robert Reich

The worst economy since the Great Depression and you might think at least one of the candidates would come up with a few big ideas for how to get us out of it.

But you'd be wrong. Neither candidate wants to take any chances by offering any large, serious proposals. Both are banking instead on negative campaigns that convince voters the other guy would be worse.



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President Obama has apparently decided against advancing any bold ideas for what he'd do in the second term, even if he has a Congress that would cooperate with him.

He's sticking to a worn script that says George W. Bush caused the lousy economy, congressional Republicans have opposed everything he's wanted to do to boost it, it's slowly on the mend anyway, the Bush tax cuts shouldn't be extended for the rich, and we shouldn't take a chance electing Romney.

Yet the public wants bigger ideas from the President, and wants to know what he'll do in his second term to get us out of this mess. A *New York Times-CBS News* poll released last week showed that a majority of voters believe the president

“can do a lot about” the economy. That’s a double-digit jump from the fall 2011.

The president could propose a new WPA, modeled after the Depression-era jobs program that hired hundreds of thousands of jobless Americans to rebuild the nation’s infrastructure, or a new Civilian Conservation Corps.

He could suggest permanently exempting the first \$25,000 of income from payroll taxes, and making up the lost revenues by eliminating the ceiling on income subject to it. He could propose resurrecting the Glass-Steagall Act and breaking up the big banks, so Wall Street doesn’t cause another financial collapse.

But you won’t hear any of this, or anything else of this magnitude, because the White House doesn’t want to take any risks. Polls give Obama a slight edge in the critical eight or so battleground states, so, the thinking goes in the Obama camp, why say anything that might give Romney and the GOP a target?

Besides, polls also show Romney isn’t well-liked by the electorate.

So Obama has decided to campaign as the anti-Romney.

Mitt Romney is playing it even more cautiously. His economic plan is really a non-plan: more tax cuts for the rich, undefined spending cuts, and no details about how he’d bring down the budget deficit. No presidential candidate since Herbert Hoover in 1928 has been more vague about what he’d do on the critical issues facing the nation.

Romney’s advisors assume Obama can’t possibly be reelected with the economy this bad. Just 44 percent of registered voters in a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll earlier this month approve of the job the president is doing on the economy, while 54 percent disapprove. Even more encouraging for Romney

is that 41 percent of those polled “strongly” disapproved of Obama’s economic performance, while just 21 percent “strongly” approved – an enthusiasm gap of major proportion.

So Romney’s advisors have concluded that all Romney has to do between now and Election Day is avoid a mistake that might give Obama and the Democrats something to shoot at.

Romney has decided to campaign as the anti-Obama.

The two anti-the-other-guy strategies fit with a ton of negative advertising that’s just begun but will reach mammoth proportions after Labor Day. Much of it will be financed by super-PACs and by political fronts already taking in hundreds of millions of dollars in secret donations. Romney’s camp hopes to out-negative Obama by almost two to one.

So whatever happens on Election Day, the next president will have to contend with two handicaps. The public won’t have endorsed any new ideas or bold plans, which means he won’t have a clear mandate to do anything on the economy.

The only thing the public will have decided is it fears and distrusts the other guy more. Which means the winner will also be burdened by almost half the electorate thinking he’s a scoundrel or worse.

The worst economy since the Great Depression, but we’re in an anti-election that will make it harder for the next occupant of the oval office to do a thing about it.

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