

# At Issue: Election



# 2012



As the 2012 election season hits full stride, we turn to Rochester experts for insight on some of the key issues.

*Interviews by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)*

FROM THE NATIONAL TO THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL, SEVERAL ISSUES are bound to grasp the attention of candidates and voters in November 2012.

Health care policy, the size and scope of the federal budget, and campaign finance are among the issues that continue to generate debate. Two more long-standing topics in American politics are likely to draw attention. One is negative advertising, which tends to arise from the mix of a divided electorate, a close contest, and well-known candidates. The second is the religious faith of the presidential candidates. President Obama's faith was a topic of discussion when he was a candidate in 2008, and this year, Mitt Romney became the first member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—or, less formally, Mormon—to win a major party presidential nomination. For faculty who follow such topics closely, this will be a busy season. Here's a sample of their perspectives going into the election.



## Our Topics and Experts

- ★ **Health Care:** Ted Brown, Professor of History, Community and Preventive Medicine, and Medical Humanities
- ★ **Campaign Advertising:** Mitchell Lovett, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Simon School
- ★ **Money in Politics:** Lynda Powell, Professor of Political Science
- ★ **Federal Budget:** David Primo, Associate Professor of Political Science and Business Administration
- ★ **Religion & Politics:** Nora Rubel, Assistant Professor of Religion



## Health Care

**Ted Brown**, *Professor of History, Community and Preventive Medicine, and Medical Humanities*

Brown is the editor or coauthor of several books, including a forthcoming history of health care reform in the United States as told through political cartoons. He teaches students in the College and the School of Medicine and Dentistry in courses including Introduction to the U.S. Health System; Health, Medicine, and Social Reform; American Health Policy and Politics; Changing Concepts of Health and Illness; and History of International and Global Health.

**The health care overhaul, in the form of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, is widely considered President Obama's signature achievement. How big a political victory is it? Will it solve the problem of access? Bring down costs?**

The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act ("ACA" or more commonly "Obamacare") in March 2010 was a considerable political achievement, in light of our history. Theodore Roosevelt supported the first national campaign for universal health coverage in the 1910s when, post-presidency, he ran again for president in 1912 on the Progressive Party ticket. President Franklin Roosevelt flirted with universal national health reform, coming out in support of a "right to adequate medical care" in his 1944



State of the Union address, and when Harry Truman was elected in 1948, he became the first sitting president to champion universal health reform, and pushed hard for it for several years. But Truman failed miserably, and under the pall of McCarthyism this country moved away from anything that could be politically labeled as “socialized medicine” and into the internationally unique and structurally bizarre system of employment-related health insurance we have today. Medicare and Medicaid, supported by President John F. Kennedy and passed under President Lyndon Johnson, were intended to cover those outside the employment-based system.

President Bill Clinton returned to the quest for universal health insurance, but he too failed—rather spectacularly. Universal health insurance emerged as a key priority of President Barack Obama’s, and after a long and complicated political battle he succeeded, the first American president to do so after a century of struggle.

Nonetheless, the Affordable Care Act is highly flawed, and its structure and implementation clearly reflect the extraordinarily difficult and complex political process that produced it. Instead of creating one uniform, administratively efficient national system, the ACA primarily creates additional patches in an inefficient patchwork system. Even if the reforms survive this fall’s elections and are fully implemented by 2014, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that some 25 to 30 million people will remain uninsured either because of numerous exceptions written into the law or because individuals will fail to obtain or employers will drop coverage, calculating that they would rather pay the penalty than pay for the insurance. Finally, those who will be covered will be covered to very different and unequal degrees.

From an ethical and social justice point of view we will fall far short of having a truly universal national system. In addition, there

will be few effective cost control measures built in and the likelihood of continued, rapid, and unsustainable cost escalation is very high, which not long down the road will result in even more severe problems than we have now and which will keep the United States as the distant outlier in health care costs compared to all other countries.

In short, President Obama has handed us, at best, a half-full glass that’s already leaking. Could any other president have done better? Perhaps not, but that assessment is more an indictment of our social values, political system, and national culture than an occasion for celebrating President Obama’s triumph.

## Campaign Advertising

**Mitchell Lovett**, *Assistant Professor of Marketing*

Lovett has coauthored numerous scholarly articles, including “The Seeds of Negativity: Knowledge and Money” in the journal *Marketing Science* (2011). He teaches Marketing Research, Advertising and Sales Promotion, and Consumer Behavior at the Simon School.

### When and why do campaigns “go negative”?

Tightly contested elections generally attract negative television advertising. People always say they don’t like negative advertising, but it’s effective at influencing some of the key voters.

The voters who know the most about the candidates are usually partisan, and their choice of candidates isn’t influenced much by advertising. Really the campaigns are going after the swing voters or the so-called “undecideds” that have been suggested to be a relatively small group in this presidential election.

Within this subset of voters, the effect of negative advertising depends on how much knowledge they have. If a voter has some knowledge of the candidates—and we’re talking about pretty superficial knowledge—the effect is greater than if, for example, he or she looked upon the candidates as complete blank slates. If people know something about the candidates, negative advertising actually has something to build on. There’s something already in their minds that the ads can trigger to generate a stronger response.

One reason negative advertising might build upon itself is that fear really has no end in the way people can imagine electoral



outcomes. Bad candidates can do really bad things. Good candidate can only do so much good—their hands are tied by Congress and other forces beyond any individual's control.

It's also the case that the candidate who's ahead gets a lot more negative attention, whereas the positive attention stays relatively stable for candidates. You saw this in the Republican primary earlier this year. As Herman Cain went up in the polls, as Rick Perry went up in the polls, you saw them getting more negative attention.

## Money in Politics

**Lynda Powell**, *Professor of Political Science*

Powell is the coauthor of four books, including this year's *The Influence of Campaign Contributions in State Legislatures* (University of Michigan Press, 2012). She teaches undergraduate and graduate students in courses such as American Elections, Money in Politics, American Legislative Institutions, and Voting and Elections, and supervises undergraduates in a variety of political science internships.

### What do we know about the relationship between big money and public policy?

Political scientists have had difficulty establishing a causal connection between campaign contributions and public policy, and some scholars have concluded that they have at best a marginal impact on legislative behavior. In my study of more than 3,000 state legislators in all 99 state legislative chambers, however, I found that contributions do indeed influence public policy, though more in some states than in others.

Previous studies that have looked for the influence of money have almost all studied the U.S. Congress, and have examined the linkage between the contributions to a member and the floor votes cast by that member on legislation of interest to donors. The problem with this approach is that looking at the votes that determine the final passage or failure of a bill ignores all the decisions that determine the details of its substantive content, as well as those that determine whether or not a bill is ever written or comes to a vote.

And it is in these less observable areas of legislative activity that legislators may most easily accommodate the interests of donors. Further, because this literature studies just the two Congressional chambers, little to no attention has been given to asking how variation in institutional design and electoral context might affect the degree to which campaign contributions influence the legislative process.

In surveying state legislators, I asked them how much time they devoted to fundraising for their own campaigns and for their caucuses. I also asked how much influence contributions had on the content and passage of legislation in the chamber. Asking about content, as well as influence, captures the range of legislative activities most likely to be affected by donations. I found fundraising



was strongly related to influence—the more time members spent fundraising, the greater the influence of contributions.

Features of institutional design and electoral context explained much of the quite substantial chamber differences in fundraising time and influence. Members in the professionalized legislatures found in big states spend substantial time fundraising, and it is in these states with highly compensated members and leaders that donations are particularly influential.

Legislators with ambitions for higher office also spend considerable time fundraising. Chambers vary greatly in the fraction of these ambitious members; the more ambitious members, the greater the influence of donors. Chamber size also matters—the more members there are to fundraise, the greater the influence of contributions.

Term limits reduce the value of holding office, and should reduce the influence of contributions. However, members in these chambers are no less eager than other legislators to sustain political careers and a large fraction of them are ambitious for higher office. Ambition negates much, although not all, of the beneficial effect of term limits. The influence of contributions is also less in states with better educated constituents, who may be more able to monitor and sanction legislative shirking.

## The Student Voter's Dilemma

You're an undergraduate at school in Rochester. You're from California. You're not registered to vote. What are you to do?

You might try calling your parents and asking. You might punch a few terms into Google and see where it leads you. Or you might be lucky enough to run into Andrew Cutillo '13, the senior coordinator for the student-led initiative in Arts, Sciences & Engineering that's come to be known as R' World, R' Vote.

This year the initiative gets a new name—the Committee for Political Engagement, or CPE—but the main mission is the same, says Cutillo, who's been involved in it since he was a freshman.

"The main thing we do is make sure everyone's registered, help people with absentee ballots, and for people registered on campus, make sure they can get to the polls."

A political science major from Clark's Summit, Pa., Cutillo says a student's rights are clear, even if the process of registering and voting doesn't initially seem to be.

"A student has a right to register to vote either in their hometown or wherever they're living to go to school, the idea being that they're in a transitional period in which they're part of two communities," he says. "So a student can register in Rochester and vote in person, or they can register to vote in their home state or district and vote absentee."

This fall, Cutillo and other members of the committee will be visible on the River Campus and each will carry a handbook of updated regulations for all 50 states—the regulations that spell out who can register absentee, when the deadlines are, and how to send in an absentee ballot.

"When we go up to a student and we say, 'Do you want to register to vote?,' and they say, 'Sure, but I'm from California, can I register there?' We'll say, 'Absolutely,'" Cutillo says. "We'll look it up, we'll work with them, we'll go online."

Cutillo says a resource students might find helpful is [www.longdistancevoter.org](http://www.longdistancevoter.org). He adds that the committee will be launching an improved website of its own this month.

As it turns out, most states permit absentee residents to request a ballot on relatively short notice—a week or less. But that's not universal, and the laws are getting more complicated.

"A wave of new voting laws in several states adds to our workload and requires additional effort from student voters," says Cutillo. "Many of these are first-time voters, and are particularly affected."

—Karen McCally



## Federal Budget

**David Primo**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Business Administration

Primo is the author or coauthor of three books, including *Rules and Restraint: Government Spending and the Design of Institutions* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). He teaches undergraduates and graduate students in courses such as Business and Politics, The Nature of Entrepreneurship, and Models in American Politics: Theory and Data.

### Will the outcome of the presidential and congressional elections have any impact on our ability to reduce the long-term structural deficit?

Given that Congress does not have a strong track record in reducing the main drivers of the deficit—Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security—the best hope for major reforms to the federal budget is presidential leadership.

Reelection-driven politicians fear that major changes to entitlement programs—especially Medicare and Social Security—will doom them to defeat. It certainly will make them targets. Politically, at least, charts and graphs cannot compete with ads like the one depicting House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan pushing an elderly woman off a cliff after Rep. Ryan proposed Medicare reform.

This political calculus might change if public opinion radically shifts or if financial markets send signals that changes are needed. Neither seems likely. In public opinion polls, respondents view the deficit as a serious problem but oppose changes in programs such as Medicare that are critical to bringing spending under control. For instance, in a 2010 Bloomberg News poll, nearly half of respondents believed that the budget deficit



is “dangerously out of control and threatens our economic future,” yet 82 percent were opposed to reductions in Medicare to deal with the problem.

Meanwhile, investors continue to buy up U.S. bonds, keeping our nation’s borrowing costs low. It also doesn’t help that when Standard & Poor’s downgraded U.S. debt last year, the markets barely flinched. Paradoxically, the good times for U.S. bonds make reform less likely since it allows a run up of debt at virtually no interest cost (right now) and provides a justification for inaction—the markets aren’t worried, so why should we be?

Strong presidential leadership might change political dynamics long enough to cement a fiscal reform agreement. The addition of Paul Ryan to Mitt Romney’s presidential ticket is a welcome development, because Ryan is one of the few members of Congress who speaks out on long-term fiscal issues. At a minimum, then, we will hear more discussion of our perilous financial situation in the coming months. But even if a President Romney or a reelected President Obama is willing to use precious political capital to push for fiscal reform, he will still need to find members of Congress, generally not known for displaying political courage, who are willing to risk their seats for the sake of the country’s fiscal future.

## Religion & Politics

**Nora Rubel**, *Assistant Professor of Religion*

Rubel is the author of *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2009) and teaches undergraduates in courses such as History of Judaism; Religion and American Foodways; and Religion and the American Presidency.

### Why are Americans so interested in the religious faith of their presidential candidates?

Concern over our presidential candidates’ religious affiliation is nothing new, but the nature of the concern has changed, reflecting at each point the anxieties of the time.

The 2008 presidential election highlighted contemporary concerns about religious identity that continue to reverberate in the ongoing 2012 campaign.

Who can forget the uproar over then candidate Barack Obama’s supposedly hidden Muslim identity? The underlying message was that being a Muslim is a negative, and thus worthy of a smear campaign. The “secret Muslim” ruckus was immediately followed by a critique of his Christian pastor and the form of his Christian affiliation. Perhaps Obama wasn’t a Muslim, but he wasn’t exactly the right sort of Christian either.

Mitt Romney continues to be plagued by questions about his Mormon faith. A prominent pastor’s statement last year that Mormonism is a “cult” only underscores the fact that many evangelicals don’t consider it to be a true Christian religion. Among his critics, there doesn’t seem to be a very specific interrogation of Mormon beliefs, just a dismissal of Mormon commitment to Christian principles (as the evangelicals see them).

Religion was an issue during presidential campaigns as early

as the election of 1800, during Thomas Jefferson’s bid for office. A widely distributed pamphlet by Dutch Reformed Minister William Linn declared opposition to Jefferson’s candidacy on the basis of Jefferson’s Deist affiliation and lack of appropriate Christian credentials. Linn believed that the law of the land, as well as its chief executive, should reflect the character of the nation—in his mind, a Christian one. Similar to the alarmist anti-Muslim rumors spread over the Internet about Obama, other opponents in 1800 spread rumors that Jefferson would force citizens to burn their Bibles.

And, of course, many Americans are aware of the hay that was made over John F. Kennedy’s Catholicism during his 1960 presidential campaign.

The biggest religious question of the mid-20th century, which lacked the religious diversity that new immigration would bring in the late 1960s, was whether a Catholic or a Jew could be fully integrated. Kennedy chose to address the Protestant Greater Houston Ministerial Association in a speech that is now frequently cited as a watershed moment in American religious history. Rather than attempt to defend the tenets of his faith to an audience that was never going to embrace Catholicism as equivalent to their Protestant denominations, he instead challenged them to uphold the ecumenical spirit of America.

Almost 50 years later, Mitt Romney delivered his “Faith in America” speech, an address meant to allay fears about the foreignness of Mormonism (a concern that is ironic, given Mormonism’s indigenous origins). Like Kennedy, Romney stated that “A person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.” However, unlike Kennedy, he stressed that while church authorities would never interfere with presidential decisions, his Christian faith would nevertheless inform his presidency. [▶](#)

