Americavitself
Barack Obama’s re-election as President of the US in 2012 represented more than just a triumph of election strategy and shrewd campaign tactics. It also reflected the changing demographics of America and illuminated the policy consequences accompanying those changes. However much the US remains, by European standards, a centre-right nation, the differences between the two continents are becoming steadily fewer and less pronounced at the same time as the differences among Americans are becoming entrenched. While many Americans remain philosophically conservative – anti-statist and anti-government – most are operationally progressive: keen to accept the benefits, services and protections that government confers on them.

On most political scientists’ models of voting behaviour, Obama’s victory should never have occurred. No President since Franklin D. Roosevelt had been re-elected with an official unemployment rate as high as 7.9 per cent, most Americans convinced that the nation was headed in the wrong direction, and anaemic levels of economic growth. But Obama won the battle of campaign frames. Mitt Romney’s inconstant efforts to cast the election as a referendum on Obama fell a poor second to the President’s successful framing of 2012 as a clear referendum on Obama fell a poor second to the President’s successful framing of 2012 as a clear referendum on Obama’s record of achievement. As the Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol argues, the first-term Obama presidency was “accomplished but embattled”.

It is tempting to explain such antipathy by reference to race. The most powerful opposition to Obama reliably came from the states of the old confederacy, while elements of the Tea Party’s fierce antagonism towards the President were tinged by barely concealed racism. Moreover, the 2012 election was not only an expression of partisan polarisation but also represented the most racialised contest in decades. An essentially white Republican Party faced off against a rainbow coalition of minorities supporting the Democrats, with some 89 per cent of Romney’s vote coming from whites, while Obama claimed over 92 per cent of black and 70 per cent of Latino votes.

But, while the racially-tinged aspects of the contest were undeniable, such an explanation is too partial to be persuasive. While America remains divided by race, it is far less clear that it is divided because of race. Rather, the Obama years represented merely the latest example of an American political system, and a broader society, mired in a state of deep dissatisfaction and broad division.

In this sense, Obama is merely the latest President to encounter the polarised politics that have become the hallmark not only of contemporary Washington politics but of America as a whole. Romney’s disparaging campaign comment about the ‘47 per cent’ of Americans dependent on government whom he could do nothing for was an inadvertent recognition of a more enduring reality – that leaders of both parties, far from being post-partisan figures above the fray, are profoundly partisan actors. Just as few Democrats approved of the job that George W. Bush did, so few Republicans thought well of Obama. Partisans of both sides tend to see an enemy, not just an opponent, occupying the Oval Office. And such attitudes in turn reflect the divergent world views and lifestyles of Democratic and Republican identifiers. As the Pew Research Center reported in 2012, the values gap between Democrats and Republicans is now greater than attitudinal divides based on gender, race, age or class.

Perhaps even more worryingly, the current US system features an ‘asymmetrical’ polarisation. While both parties have moved apart from the centre, the Republicans have shifted considerably further to the Right than Democrats have to the Left. With quasi-parliamentary parties operating in a separated system of government that demands compromise and consensus in order to function, disagreement and dysfunction instead constitute the default positions.

While compromise may yet be possible, the 2012 results augur badly for the prospects of the US taking the urgent and painful fiscal measures to restore economic growth, reform entitlement programmes and cut the national deficit and debt by trillions of dollars. Although both parties know full well the adverse consequences that attend obstruction, neither faces sufficient incentives or sanctions to abandon positions cherished by their activist base and key campaign donors. With most general elections a non-event, the main concern of the majority of nationally-elected officials is a primary challenge – making them especially attentive to the concerns of the more hard-line activists than ordinary voters. Whether the grave crises facing the US can be met in a second Obama term remains to be seen. It will require major acts of statesmanship that career politicians more typically eschew than embrace.

Robert Singh is Professor of Politics at Birkbeck. His book, Barack Obama’s Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement, was published by Bloomsbury in 2012.