

The Poverty of Republican Policies (with Peter Siavelis)

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When John Kerry lost to George Bush in the 2004 presidential election, the battle between them was waged on two fronts. They clashed on the handling of the war in Iraq – a war that Bush had initiated and Kerry had initially supported. They clashed on a social agenda dominated by the three 3Gs – gays, guns and God. John Kerry did a lot of duck shooting that fall, but to no avail. Republican orthodoxy on the war and the family swept all before it in 2004.

But this Presidential season is likely to be different – certainly in content and possibly in outcome.

It is likely to be different because public attitudes to the war in Iraq have altered; and because the Democrats are this time fielding a candidate with a consistent record of opposition to it.

It is likely to be different too because in 2008 social issues are not drowning out economic ones. That is not because gay marriage has gone away. It is rather that poverty and economic insecurity stalk the land in ways they did not in 2004, and demand their place at the top of the domestic political agenda.

Particularly here, for North Carolinians are no strangers to poverty and inequality. This state is currently one of 37 in the United States in which the average income of the bottom fifth of income earners failed to rise as rapidly between 1987 and 2006 as did the average income of the top fifth. The gap between the two averages is now vast and growing. \$16,436 is the average income for the bottom fifth of North Carolinian wage-earners. \$197,331 is the average for the top fifth. That is a ratio of more than 12:1; and \$16,436 – we need to remember - is actually \$4000 less than the official poverty level for a family of four. So much for trickle down economics!

There is more. At 5.4%, North Carolina's unemployment rate is currently 38th in the nation, and the growth rate in real incomes for the average North Carolinian family since 2002 has been effectively zero. Mix into that cocktail of woe, falling house prices and rising repossessions: more than 3000 people had their houses repossessed in North Carolina in April alone. Add rising fuel and food costs, and the never-ending drain of public funds into an unnecessary war in Iraq, and it is crystal clear why economic – and not social – issues will dominate electoral politics in 2008. People are hurting. They are hurting in their wallets.

Little wonder then that first Barack Obama, and now even John McCain, offers us a politics of change. How could they not: but we have had offers of this kind before. What we must ensure in 2008 is that the change on offer eases the pressure on ordinary Americans by pushing back the tide of inequality, and by recreating strong and dependable jobs in an economy from which they have been draining away for too long.

If ever there was an election which needed to be dominated by issues of economic stability and social justice, it is this one. Its outcome will require us to vote wisely and to vote well.