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## Prosperity Versus Equality at the Polls

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## My view: Prosperity versus equality at the polls

By Nathan B. Oman

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Democrats will take a drubbing in Tuesday's election. Of course, the party out of power always picks up seats in midterm elections, but in part results will reflect a victory for the value of prosperity over the value of equality.

This can be seen most clearly in the debate over President Obama's healthcare reform bill. Mr. Obama came to office in January 2009 in the fiercest recession since World War II. More than at any time in the last two generations, Americans faced economic hardship.

Nevertheless, President Obama forced healthcare to the top of the agenda. Uniquely among advanced economies, America has not provided universal healthcare. The absence long marked America's greater acceptance of economic inequality.

For President Obama the inequality inherent in the American healthcare system is reason enough for action. During debate over the bill, however, Democrats also insisted that reform was a partial solution to America's economic woes.

The electorate has not been persuaded. Suffice it to say that Obamacare has become a political liability. Economic concerns may dominate all others for voters this year, but the inequality of America's healthcare system does not seem to be among those concerns. This fact is revealing.

What concerns Americans is not inequality but economic hardship. They are not the same thing. The chief source of economic hardship is not health insurance or its lack but unemployment. In the midst of recession, creating new burdens for businesses seems unwise to many voters. They would rather have a job than a new government-mandated benefit.

America's culture wars have long frustrated Democrats. A common lament on the left is that so-called "wedge issues" such as gay rights and abortion "distract" voters from economic concerns. If only the nation would focus on such issues, progressive activists have argued, a more economically egalitarian America could be made.

With voters' attention centered on the economy, however, equality is of less interest than prosperity. In fairness to President Obama, he has supported measures such as TARP, the auto-industry bailout, and the \$700 billion stimulus bill aimed at restoring prosperity. The wisdom of these measures is open to debate, but beyond them the choice to focus on healthcare in the midst of recession suggests that in the tension between equality and prosperity, President Obama's instinct is to pull for equality. It will cost him and his party.

Across the developed world, governments are rebalancing these values. In the United Kingdom, the newly elected conservative government has proposed swinging cuts to the British welfare state. In France, workers have taken to the streets in the hundreds of thousands to protest reduced retirement benefits. Even Sweden — yes, Sweden! — has elected right-of-center governments promising to trim its social safety net in the name of prosperity.

All of these nations will strike the balance between equality and prosperity differently than the United States. The outcome in this election, however, suggests two things. First, Americans are more

concerned with economic hardship than with inequality. Faced with a choice between a more egalitarian society and a more prosperous one, they will choose prosperity. Second, those who wish for a more economically egalitarian America should argue for their policies not in terms of equality but in terms of prosperity.

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