The Meaning of the 2012 Elections  
Roanoke College, November 13, 2012

We never fully know the meaning of an election until historical retrospect. But this is what I think I see based on what we know so far.

1. **The nation remains closely divided.** And even though President Obama won reelection, it was with a smaller margin than in 2008. Humility is called for on his side, and on his party’s side. One wonders when this 50/50 division is ever going to end. Regional variations are especially striking right now.

2. **It is hard not to see the red/blue division as fundamentally demographic rather than based on policy.** We see the dramatically declining impact of white male prosperous mid-American rural and small town middle aged and older voters, who supported Romney strongly. We see the increasing impact of nonwhite, female, younger voters, who supported Obama strongly. Romney was the very picture of his demographic, as was Obama of his demographic. Their audiences at speeches and the conventions also reflected that demographic picture. Given birthrate and immigration trends, it is hard not to see it as an election pitting America’s white male past vs. its multiethnic egalitarian future, with the future just barely winning. Some people find that terrifying or depressing. I find it exciting, in keeping with the overall trajectory of American history at its most inclusive best.

3. **This was also an election about American identity.** The GOP in general offered free market individualist-capitalist economics, wrapped in patriotism, together with conservative postures on abortion and gays, together with the usual conservative religiosity, articulated mainly by white men. The Democrats offered more of a common good social democratic vision, somewhat more internationalist, with feminist and libertarian posture on abortion and gays, with a left-leaning interfaith religiosity and space for secularists. America slightly preferred the latter, at least for president.

4. **To the extent this was about the two men at the top of the tickets,** we see in retrospect that Obama’s place as a history-making figure in American politics is cemented, and Romney will be forgotten in the long term. Today he is best viewed as a rather awkward candidate with an interesting resume who made a valiant run despite some serious obstacles to success, and it is hard to imagine him having any kind of role in GOP politics from Nov. 7 forward.

5. **Obama ran a tactical campaign rather than offering much inspiration.** He came dangerously close in the first debate to seeming like someone who was tired of being president and dealing with all this politics junk and almost asking for a ticket to retirement and memoir writing. He only seemed to find his voice after the election was over, during what I consider a brilliant late night acceptance speech when he embodied the demographic change represented in the election and essentially declared that a new America has arrived.

6. I think **the mildly improving economy helped neutralize Romney’s edge** and campaign strategy focusing on our lost jobs. Romney never really offered a plan for improving the economy other than the usual supply side nostrums. There were moments, as in the first debate,
where he looked like a credible tinkerer under the economic hood. But his lack of specifics, together with the worry that his budget plan numbers didn’t add up, together with the multimillionaire identity, 47% comments, and wealthy PAC friends, neutralized any real advantage there. Still, let’s face it, anyone who knows the real economic situation, and especially the challenges facing our young people such as those gathered here today, know that we face profound structural challenges that so far no one has adequately addressed.

7. **Foreign policy might have helped Obama.** Romney was able to do little in the foreign policy debate to show why the US should replace Obama with him. Having cold-bloodedly killed bin Laden really helped Obama. The critique over Benghazi was red meat for the Republican base but not beyond. It seems that in many ways we have a consensus foreign policy right now, though I think many elements are worthy of reconsideration. I was terribly glad that Obama’s more pragmatic approach to military spending will prevail over Romney’s odd desire to peg it to 4% GDP. I also think that Obama really will now get us out of Afghanistan as out of Iraq, and will avoid major troop insertions in his second term if at all possible.

8. **The 44 point edge in Latino voters for Obama,** together with how they helped him win Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, (Florida), and now constituting 10% of the electorate, is one of the major developments of the election. Latinos are now organized, and even though they are a very religious demographic (both Catholic and evangelical), they went with Obama because they saw him as much more friendly and much more likely to bring a legalization path and immigration reform. At this point I will be shocked if we don’t get something like the Bush proposal for comprehensive reform. The Democrats will be all in; if the GOP opposes it, it will be further evidence of a reactionary political death wish.

9. **Health care reform will survive,** and from my perspective this is a good thing. Rolling back the significant gains in health care access won by the ACA would have been a major setback for a minimally just and decent society. The challenge now is to find a way to cut health care spending. This will undoubtedly require some experimentation and eventually changes to the law.

10. **The Christian Right interprets a select range of current events as confirming a narrative of national decline** and abandonment of America’s “godly heritage.” The select list this time included Obama’s pro choice stance on abortion, eventual embrace of gay marriage, and health care reform or at least the status of the regulations vis a vis dissenting religious groups. All the remaining big guns were out trying to sell that narrative: FRC, CC, Grahams, Huckabee, Reed, SBC people, some of the Catholic leadership, etc. They went all in on trying to mobilize their troops to defeat Obama, sometimes with the most dire religious warnings, and they failed. I think their religious vision is largely flawed, their politics flagrantly partisan, and their movement damaged by yet another failed attempt to exercise influence in the old way. And it is easy to detect among GOP operatives a deep weariness with the can’t live with em can’t live without em reality of dealing with the Christian Right. They are a pivotal part of the GOP voting base, but their true believer extremists can’t win (Akin, Mourdock) and their rhetoric alienates white moderates, women, and pretty much everyone else. I know that world, and I know that it is not much like the rest of America. It doesn’t need to be putting forward Senate candidates.
11. **I am a center-left evangelical Christian**, sharing many doctrinal commitments with other evangelicals but reading the political-ethical implications of my faith very differently.

--I do not share a narrative that America was once a godly nation and now isn’t—or that God once blessed America with special protection and now we are doomed because we are walking away from God. Nations are never purely virtuous, and only Israel was the chosen nation and relates to God in terms of a salvation historical framework. Darkness and light are mixed. Our media is worse today but our race relations are better. Our sexual ethics are worse but our environmental ethics are better. Etc. It’s not a matter of darkness v. light in either eras or parties, but which mix of good and bad looks relatively better at any given moment.

--I agree that a 20% abortion rate (1 abortion for every 5 pregnancies) is a terrible scandal. I agree that Roe v. Wade is too loose. I think the American people could be persuaded to consider an abortion law reform that did not prosecute women and allowed abortion early and/or with 3-4 exceptions. At least, I think a person could be elected president on that platform all things being equal. (If Romney had been elected, that might well have happened.) But a) I think that our abortion problem is fundamentally ethical-cultural rather than legal, and that overturning Roe would not fix the core problem and b) GOP keeps putting forward candidates who say stupid or narrow minded things about women and abortion. In any case, with the reelection of Obama the current abortion regime will stay indefinitely longer, and this does not make me happy.

--The advance of gay rights--into public approval of gay civil marriage and the election of the first gay senator this year--is a major watershed. This issue is dramatically shifting from a religious sexual ethics issue to a bigotry civil rights issue, and the former side is losing. The anti gay marriage side believes and says that God’s/nature’s design for sexuality and marriage are clear and that US laws should reflect that. But that is a losing argument in an America not so sure about who rightly speaks for God and nature and, more deeply, a nation wired with a bias toward extending equal rights and liberty absent compelling reasons not to do so. Not being able to show any concrete harm caused by gay relationships, the opponents are losing and will lose this fight. Meanwhile, being identified as fundamentally anti-gay hurts the cause of evangelical Christianity. Christians are doing and must do significant work rethinking the biblical ethics of this issue, and meanwhile, even if they are never convinced to change their views about sexuality, might need to make a tactical retreat in any case.

--The third pillar of the Christian Right anti-Obama case was religious liberty. The presenting cause célèbre was the way regulations were written related to contraceptive coverage requirements in health care reform. The first version was badly flawed. The reformed version was better but didn’t satisfy the Bishops or the right. The broader concern is that there are constituencies in the Democrats who really don’t get these concerns and don’t care about them. They have been balanced by internal and external religious voices who do care. My concern is that there will be a secularist overreach that will at least partly justify the currently paranoid fears of conservative Catholics and evangelicals that a secular government is going to take their religious liberty away. We don’t need a Kulturkampf over religion in a second Obama term. Strong principled but pragmatic leadership on all sides is required.
Closing: Beyond all the demographic changes and symbolism, government exists to serve the common weal: provide for the common defense, advance the common good, solve common problems, and protect the genius of our liberal constitutional system. Our procedures must work fairly, and must produce effective governance. The American people returned essentially the same cast of characters to Washington. We need that crew to address big problems in a timely manner and with good lawmaking. Surely we can all agree to hope this is what will happen.