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## The United States Launches the Post-Obama Era

By Zhu Wenli \*

There are nearly 15 months before Barack Obama formally steps down as president of the United States, but since heated competition occurs even at the initial stage of the 2016 presidential election, the focus of the discussions on domestic policies in the US has started to shift away from Obama. Obama has overcome the financial crisis and revitalized the U.S. economy, which has been basically recognized, but he has been criticized for failing to solve the structural problems of the society and economy and voices linger endlessly on his inability to transform the trend of polarized opposition for the American politics. Seeking for creative or even subversive policy schemes and the trend of pursuing total innovation are bringing more changes to the mainstream politics of the United States.

### **New politicians release their power**

So far in the party primaries of the Democratic and Republican, the people on the upper hand are not Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush who are considered with great prospect unanimously but two new politicians -- Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Although Bernie Sanders, the Senator from Vermont, has been in the political

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community for nearly forty years, he has been participating in the elections and political discussions as an independent individual. As a real estate giant and TV star, Trump has never seriously stepped into the political forum. However, in the initial stage of the election, Trump has stood out and ranked first on the opinion poll rating, far ahead of the other Republican candidates. Sanders have unexpectedly attracted a lot of constituencies in the campaign rallies of various states, particularly young constituencies, displaying an increasingly rising trend. According to the opinion polls from many media in September 2015, the approval rating of Sanders was ahead of that of Hillary in Iowa and New Hampshire where party primaries were held the earliest.

By contrast, well-known politicians who have been active in the political forum for many years with abundant financial capital and a wide range of acquaintances have been overshadowed. Hillary has been troubled by the "email gate" with dwindling support rate; Jeb Bush performs ordinarily in the debate and his opinion poll ranking is only at the middle of the Republican Party; The two once promising Republican candidates -- Rick Perry, governor of Texas state, and Scott Walker, governor of Wisconsin state, who have already withdrawn from the election for their inability to attract the attention of constituencies.

The development of the election situation not only is unexpected, but also has shocked or changed some fixed rules in the mainstream politics in the United States. For example, Trump has for many times deliberately challenged the American-style "politically-correct" criteria, attacked the Latin-American immigrants, denounced women, and ridiculed Islamism; Sanders has publicly announced that he does not support capitalism, is a firm democratic socialist, and favors the Nordic Model. However, they have not been marginalized within the party and still maintained a rising trend. The candid remarks of the new politicians have apparently influenced the debate themes and countermeasure directions for the primaries

of the two parties.

### **Echo of history**

It is fair to say that seeking for policy breakthrough with the help of political forum margin or even social forces is an important tradition of the American politics. The dominance by new politicians this year also once appeared in the 1992 general election. At that time, the independent candidate Ross Perot suddenly rose as a new force, changing the pattern of two-party opposition and making budget deficit elimination the national focus. To trace back further, in the 1976 general election, Jimmy Carter also once attracted constituencies as a fresh image outside the Washington circle and successfully entered the Whitehouse, recovering the presidential prestige which had been lost since the Watergate Scandal.

If we even look further back at the American history, we can still find other two more worthwhile thought-provoking examples for comparison. One example was Andrew Jackson who served as the American president from 1829 to 1837. In the American political forum at that moment, he was a new politician from a frontier state in the west and was once rejected together by the influential politicians of the ruling party. He finally entered the Whitehouse with the support of the ordinary people at the grassroots level. He was committed to promoting political equality and economic equality, realizing the universal suffrage for white men, and seeking for the regional balance between the east and the west, the balance in industrial structure between industry and commerce and agriculture, the stratum balance between big financial capital and small agricultural and industrial owners. Internally, he started the period of so-called Jacksonian Democracy and externally he shaped the diplomatic tradition called Jacksonianism. Exactly on the basis of the political, economic and social equality trends he advocated, the United States smoothly kicked off the first round of industrialization, urbanization and modernization process.

The second example was William Jennings Bryan who was a key figure active in the American political forum from the 1890s to the 1910s. As a marginalized person from an agricultural state in the Midwest, he made a sensational "Cross of Gold" speech on the Democratic National Convention in 1896, lashing out at the gold standard system and denouncing it as the cross forced upon the national economy by the financial capital. Later, Bryan failed in his three attempts to compete for the President on behalf of the Democratic Party, but his thoughts and statements pushed forward the development of civilian movement and progressive movement in the US.

These reforms were fundamentally a kind of social rebound to the problems of economic inequality left over by the first industrialization, urbanization, and modernization period in the US or the Gilded Age. The US realized astonishing economic growth in the Gilded Age and gained a huge amount of economic profit, but the profit was distributed extremely unevenly among all social hierarchies, causing many social problems. When the existing political mechanism could not timely respond, many social forces and some new people and groups who originally did not contact politics got involved and provided new concepts. Bryan could be said to be a representative of them. Their activities had changed the American political discussion. The government regulated the market, guaranteed the labor right, gradually established the financial redistribution system, and urged enterprises to shoulder social responsibilities. These policies were adopted and got good effects, easing the social conflict of the American society and laying a more solid foundation for the continuous development of the economy.

I believe that the US could become a world power not mainly because it was the ultimate victor in the First and Second World War, but because it led in finishing the task of the domestic reform and solved the global problem of that era. Other western powers failed to successfully solve the problems owing to internal and

external reasons, but through progressive movement and the following New Deal, the US found the solution, so it relatively firmly established its world leadership and possessed the ability to shape the international system. Why did it have the final say in the international stage? At least, the partial reason was that its domestic system proved successful, including the international system concepts it formulated, many of which were improved in domestic experiments, then widely expanded to the international relations and endowed with new significance, hence making a difference in the world.

### **Directly face the core issue**

The reason why new figures in the American political forum can attract a lot of attention and support is that they have inherited the qualities of their predecessors Jackson and Bryan and are willing to directly face the core political and economic problem in the US -- **uneven distribution of globalization benefits**. In the first stage of globalization from 1990 to 2007, the US was one the powers who benefited the most and its total economic growth was astonishing. But meanwhile, the distribution of the wealth increase totally favored the high-income hierarchies. Various statistics in the US show that the net beneficiary and the net loser in the society and economy have become extremely polarized and the proportion is no longer 1% to 99%, but 0.1% to 99.9%. In the 2010s, the proportion of the income of the 0.1% of the extremely rich groups in the overall national wealth returned to the 1920 level. Before 2000, the income growth speed of median families in the US could still catch up with the economic growth speed, then became obviously backward and sharply plummeted after the 2008 financial crisis.

After the outbreak of the financial crisis, the price scissors between the benefit and distribution further expanded. Although the extremely rich group might shoulder more responsibilities for causing the financial crisis, they got more proportion of benefit distribution during

the crisis rescue period. Therefore, many people criticize Obama for failing to solve the problem of inequality with the help of the financial crisis and even some people say that he "has wasted the crisis".

According to the research of the French scholar Thomas Piketty, the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the increasing income inequality are global phenomena. In the book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* which has attracted wide attention, he uses a lot of statistics to prove that such phenomena have occurred in almost all economies involved in globalization. A similar case has emerged in all countries that the growth benefit of globalization is controlled by few people at the top. Globalization has further worsened the domestic inequality and this problem is global. Even we can say that the more a country benefits from globalization, the more prominent the problem of inequality is.

No matter American new politicians are serious or act well, in fact they have seized this important core issue and tried to find solutions from either the right or left direction. They may be the keynote of American political development in the process of this general election. Meanwhile, this is a significant focus for the global political and economic analysis, international order research, and global governance discussions.

### **Define the new era**

Targeting the present political and social atmosphere in the US, we can try to make some observations and reflections.

Firstly, the old politicians in the American political forum have lost their advantages during the initial stage of the election because they still use the middle road popular in the 1990s to solve the problems and try to persuade the constituencies with their coordination and compromise abilities. However, this kind of middle style has now lost the support from many constituency groups. This predicts that

changes may take place in the political atmosphere of the US and even all western countries, shifting from pursuing middle-way trend to the keynote of choosing a distinctly left or right side.

Secondly, although new politicians like Sanders and Trump may not truly become the party representative in the general election next year and become the Whitehouse master, they are likely to change the political discussions like Bryan and Jackson in the history and reshape the policy topics. Since they can accurately seize the core problems and put forward fresh and new solutions, they force the whole country to face these problems and further kick off the new political and economic trend. At least, they provide such an opportunity for the US.

Thirdly, what kind of era is the "Post-Obama Era" on earth? For Americans, the most ideal scenario is that the "Post-Obama Era" can be the second progressive era. According to this historical analogy line of thinking, the globalization period is similar to the Gilded Age of the US from 1870 to 1890. If the second progressive era is the same with the first progressive era and the US can directly face the global inequality and global income gap, it is possible for the US to find out effective policy portfolios first, solve internal challenges, and raise its national power to a higher level. Then as many Americans have been expecting, the 21st century will turn into another American century.

Of course, for Americans, non-satisfactory cases may also occur. Because the income inequality involves such a wide range of areas, various chronic social and economic problems overlap here. For example, the racial conflicts, generation differences and regional development imbalance which long trouble the US are all intertwined with income inequality. So the core problem may be covered by other problems. If so, it is possible that the "Post-Obama Era" may repeat the pace of Obama -- although it calls for reform, it only addresses the symptoms rather than the root causes of the

problem.

If the US avoids challenges, it objectively provides opportunities for the other countries. If the political discussion in the US points out problems, but cannot solve them, the major country which can find out the proper proposal first in the world may replace the US and grab the right of speech in the 21st century and define the theme of the future era first.

Fourthly, what is the right posture to face the new era? The American scholar Richard Haass has put forward the strategic concept in his book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home* that international problems should be solved through solving domestic problems. If the analysis follows this line of thinking, the recent shrinking strength of the US cannot be simply viewed as the lack of power, but may symbolize more ambitious and intentional arrangement.

Similarly, how should the other countries expand their international influence? Should they use their power in the international arena and directly intervene in and face every problem and does this mean the expansion of international influence? Or should they draw on the line of thinking in the US from solving domestic problems to international ones? The best way for a country to expand its international influence and increase the international right of speech is to solve its own domestic problems well and lead in coming up with a set of domestic solutions in face of the uneven distribution of globalization benefit.

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