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Election 2012: The Home Stretch

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Distinctly Catholic

Over the past many weeks, I have used my Monday morning post to focus on different issues in this election. But, in terms of issues, the cake is now baked for both candidates. Neither candidate has made as good a case for their candidacy as could be made. Both has been more than vague about the hard choices needed to avoid the fiscal cliff that the winner will face immediately after the election. But, voters know the essential contours of the choice they have to make. The race now comes down to two issues, turnout and Friday's unemployment numbers.

Molly Ball has an important article up at the Atlantic **contrasting the two campaigns? get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts in the key swing state of Virginia**. After Ohio, Virginia is probably the most important swing state. If Obama repeats his 2008 victory in the Old Dominion, the first Democrat to win the commonwealth since LBJ in 1964, he will be well on his way to the magic number of 270 electoral college votes. Obama can afford to lose Ohio if he wins Virginia. Romney probably needs both states.

At this stage of the race, ads matter less, although they can still matter a great deal in congressional races where the candidates are not as well known. For the presidential candidates, here have been three widely watched debates. There has been a slew of campaign ads. Now, the only thing for the campaigns to do is focus on GOTV efforts.

As Ball reports, Obama not only has a huge advantage in the number of field offices in Virginia, but each office is a hub of organized activity. Romney's field offices are fewer in number and organization.

Seth Masket, at Mischiefs of Faction, reports the same tale.

Polls show that both men's followers are about equal in enthusiasm, but Americans are notoriously bad about getting to the polls on election day. Even in 2008, which saw long lines at many polling stations and an uptick in voter participation, only 56% of American voted. Point of person privilege: My

hometown of Hampton, Connecticut won our state's Democracy Cup for its consistently high turnout rate. Even in the municipal elections of 2011, 63.75% of voters cast a ballot!

So, it is vital that each campaign gets its voters to the polls and here all indicators point to a potentially decisive advantage for Team Obama. In addition to a better-prepared and better-organized GOTV effort, the Obama campaign benefits from the way people use and which people use modern technology. If you break down the electorate by age, Obama does best among younger voters and Romney runs strongest among older voters. Younger voters live on the iPhones and iPads and cellphones. They text. They use Facebook. There are simply more means available to reach them and remind them to vote. If the election is as close as the polls indicate, Obama's ability to turn out his voters may prove decisive.

The other potentially decisive fact this election cycle is a product of the calendar: The October unemployment report will be issued in the Friday before the election, something that only happens when election day falls on the 6th or 7th of November. As a general rule, a last-minute development is unlikely to affect the election. The weekend before the 2000 election, news of George W. Bush's DUI came out, and it had no appreciable effect on voters. On the economy, most people have long since decided whether they think the economy is moving in the right or wrong direction before the final weekend.

What is different this time is that the unemployment report, no matter what it says, will confirm one of the two candidates' existing narratives. If the unemployment rate falls, Obama can say, "We are moving in the right direction. It is no time to change horses." If the unemployment numbers are bad, Romney can say, "Is this what a recovery should look like?" Of course, there are three parts to the report from the Department of Labor. The household survey will yield the data that sets the unemployment rate. The survey of businesses indicates how many jobs were created. Finally, the Labor Department adjusts the numbers from previous months. So, it is entirely possible that the unemployment rate could tick up, even while the economy adds, say, 150,000 new jobs. A muddled report will not affect the race. But, if the unemployment rate declines, and the number of new jobs is robust, and the adjustments to prior months show that the economy did better than originally thought, Obama is on his way to re-election. Conversely, a report that is dismal across the board gives Romney the edge.

There will be a ton of polls this week - there have been a ton of polls already. Nate Silver, the single best analyst of polling data in the country, pushed Obama's chances over 70% late last week. But, the race is exceedingly close and several states could be decided by very few votes. One thing we must all pray does NOT happen is if one candidate were to win the electoral college but lose the popular vote. Close elections tend to yield divisive politics in any event, but a close election in which the winner got fewer votes than the other guy would virtually guarantee more gridlock.

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