

# Is Fox Even Helping the Republicans Anymore?

This has been a difficult election season for Fox News. Among the most enduring media images of the last few days of the election are Karl Rove late on election night angrily denying that Ohio, and thus the presidency, had gone to President Obama, and Dick Morris only a few days before the election confidently predicting a Romney landslide. Morris later tried to explain away his mistake after the election by claiming he had done it to create enthusiasm among Republican voters. The incidents involving Rove and Morris, both of whom work as both commentators on Fox and political consultants to conservative clients, are obviously embarrassing for Fox, but also raise the question of whether the network has outlived its value, even to the Republican Party.

Because Fox generally reports news based on partisan talking points and ideological certainty rather than focusing on pesky things like facts, information and events, it has, in the past, been effective in encouraging misperceptions about President Obama's background, nurturing the growth and development of the Tea Party movement and covering economic policy by referring to any spending by the government as socialism. These things have helped mobilize and misinform the right wing base of the Republican Party. Similarly, during the Bush administration, Fox helped increase support for the Gulf War by repeating White House positions on weapons of mass destruction, almost without question.

Over the last several years, this has been very helpful to the Republican Party, but during 2012, particularly in recent months, this has begun to change. Fox has now become a problem for the Republican Party because it keeps a far right base mobilized and angry making it hard for the party to move to the center, or increase its appeal as it must do to remain electorally competitive. For example, Bill O'Reilly's explanation of why the Obama was reelected may, in fact, resonate, with the older and heavily white viewership of Fox, but it is precisely the wrong public message and messenger for the Party.

Moreover, while Fox helps the Republican Party when it slants its news coverage to the right, it damages the Party when its news coverage becomes too shoddy. A network that cannot get election night right because one of its star pundits simply refuses to accept defeat offers very little reason for potential viewers to watch it. Similarly a network whose pundits are so off in their election predictions will ultimately marginalize itself completely, as Fox is beginning to do.

One of the bigger challenges facing the Republican Party is that they are perceived as the, to phrase it nicely, less smart of the two major parties. The anti-science perspective, unwillingness to speak out against absurd sounding conspiracy theories, and even the attacks on Nate Silver, presumably because Silver did somewhat sophisticated math, have contributed to this and are damaging the party. It is no coincidence that the Obama campaign had a more sophisticated targeting and turnout operation and better statistical modeling. A party that refuses to take a firm stand in support of evolution or

recognizing climate change is not going to draw too many people with advanced statistical training as advisors and consultants.

Fox contributes to that environment by creating a climate where partisan rantings of people like Dick Morris are indulged while criticism by serious people like Tom Ricks is shut down and attacked. There is no inevitable link between conservatism and stupidity, but one could be forgiven for coming to that conclusion while watching Fox News. As it is currently constructed, Fox News is going to bring in almost no swing voters in the coming years. It will more likely continue to repel them through poor analysis and rants that strike the precise tone the party should be trying to avoid.

It is in the interest of the Democrats, not the Republicans, for there to be a loud, extremist, heavily white faction in the Republican Party, constantly pushing that party rightward. One of the reasons Mitt Romney was so unable to pivot back to the center was due to the drumbeat at Fox which contributing to forcing him to the right during the primary season. Even after the primary season, when Fox became a big supporter for Romney, the rift between official editorial position and the political feelings of Fox viewers and hosts, was clear.

Unfortunately for the Republicans, while this is bad politics, it is good business for Fox. By positioning itself as the place where angry Republicans can go for their rhetorical red meat, Fox guarantees itself a sizable viewership, so the incentive for Fox to keep doing what it is doing is substantial, as is the potential damage to the Republican Party.

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