

Fighting Over Blame in the Republican Party

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In the last few weeks, the buzz about the internal battles inside the Republican Party has been growing. The Roveites hate the Libertarians, the Libertarians hate the mainstream Republicans, the mainstream Republicans hate the Tea Partiers and everybody hates President Obama. It feels more like a [Tom Lehrer song](#) than the plight of a serious political party facing a serious struggle.

Because the U.S. has been governed by the same two parties for more than a century and a half, and because each of these parties are large coalition-based parties, it is not uncommon for one of the parties to be riven by an ideological split. In the 1960s, for example, the Democratic Party was home to some of the most aggressive supporters of Civil Rights as well as the most committed segregationists. Similarly, as late as 1980, there were political battles between the moderate and conservative wings of the Republican Party.

The conflict in today's Republican Party is different. Although there are policy elements to it, such as the divergent views on some social and foreign policy issues between the Libertarian and other parts of the party, most of the differences are personal. More precisely, the major issue dividing the Republican Party now is who is most to blame for the party's poor showing in November of 2012. The next issue dividing the party is who is best positioned to win the White House in 2016.

Some blame Karl Rove for how ineffectively his independent expenditure campaign was run. Others blame the Tea Parties for putting a radical and, to a real extent, bigoted face on the party. Still others blame Mitt Romney and the mainstream of the Republican Party for running a weak candidate who was so unable to connect with the electorate. The Libertarians blame the rest of the party for, it seems, being too supportive of big government.

From the outside, the dynamic of the Republican Party looks not like struggle for the soul and direction of the party, but a desperate effort to assign responsibility for November's loss, which has devolved into a circular firing squad of blame. Accordingly, it does not much matter who, if anybody, wins this battle. Does anybody not attending a CPAC convention think it matters whether Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz or even Rand Paul are the standard bearers for the future of the party, or whether Ann Coulter, Karl Rove or Sarah Palin has most correctly diagnosed the party's problem.

Thus far, the only issue which is dividing the non-Libertarian branch of the Republican Party is immigration, which has created, at the elite level, a divide on both generation and region. Younger Republicans, and those from the Southwest, are more supportive of immigration reform, while the rest of the party's leadership is more reluctant to reform immigration. The problem for the party, is that there is little debate around a number of other issues, ranging from marriage equality, to a more equitable tax system, on which Republican positions are increasingly out of the American mainstream.

Rove, Coulter, John McCain, Rubio and most others among the party leadership have shown little willingness to be flexible on the issues that appeal to the base that has captured the party, but few others. It doesn't matter if they lost in November because Romney was a bad candidate, Rove ran a poor independent campaign or because they did not stress the right issues. As long as the party remains inflexible on taxes, the economy and social issues, it will continue to lose. In short, there is no struggle between the moderate and conservative wings of the party as there no longer is a moderate wing of the Republican Party.

The absence of a moderate wing of the Republican Party is one of the biggest problems facing the party, but it is absent from much of this dialog. Any reasonably informed political observer can see that a Republican Party that did not say much about social issues, recognized the need for the wealthiest Americans to contribute more tax revenue and understood that not all social spending should be vilified as socialism, would be considerably more popular than what is left of the Republican Party today. There are, however, no voices left in the Republican Party to say this, and few primary voters left in the party who would support this. Thus, the things that need to be said to rescue the party go unstated and instead, Rove, Coulter, Rush Limbaugh and others argue about blame and relative political incompetence.