

The Republicans in 2012

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2012, like most years, promises to be an interesting political year. Some of the stories which were so significant in 2011 will continue, while others will fade away. The tragicomic reality show which was the Republican nominating process will quickly give way to a presidential election with two candidates who, unlike Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry -- who horrified us, made us laugh and otherwise entertained us in 2011 -- have a real chance of being president in 2013. The campaign between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama will likely be very close with a great deal of drama as the US engages in the quadrennial event known as "The most important election of our lifetimes."

This election, however, will probably not be the most important election of our lifetimes. Romney and Obama, while having different backgrounds and views on most major issues, are also both part of the political mainstream and share more opinions and approaches, particularly with regards to foreign policy, than the upcoming campaign will suggest. Obviously, Obama would make better Supreme Court appointments, push for more support for those suffering in this economy and generally advocate for a more progressive and equal society, but these are standard differences between the two major parties. Neither of these candidates is a radical, or somebody poised, or able, to substantially remake American political or economic life.

There is nonetheless always a lot at stake in a presidential elections, but this election will also have significant meaning for the Republican Party whether Romney wins or loses. The 2012 presidential election has long been something of a paradox to Republicans. On the one hand, it was seen by many as a good opportunity to win the White House and unseat a Democratic president who is very unpopular on the right and in a vulnerable electoral situation. On the other hand, the race only drew centrists like Romney and Jon Huntsman and unelectable fringe candidates like Cain, Bachmann, Paul and Rick Santorum. No conservative candidate with a reasonable chance of winning ever seriously considered the race. This is a puzzle that undoubtedly is extremely frustrating to conservative strategists.

As a result, the right wing of the Republican Party is in a bit of a quandary as the long general election approaches. The ease with which it is looking like Romney will wrap up the Republican nomination is itself an indication that the moderate wing of the party is not as irrelevant as some on the far right, and for that matter some Democrats, would like to believe. Moreover, if Romney wins, the right wing cause will be set back a number of years as there will be an understanding among many in the Republican Party that only a moderate can win. This is largely a matter of perception as Romney on many issues would probably govern just as conservatively as any other Republican president.

While a Romney victory could precipitate a crisis for the right wing of the Republican Party, an Obama victory over Romney, which is certainly a real possibility, could lead to greater chaos

within the Republican Party generally. If Romney, after gaining the support of almost all of the Republican establishment early in the nominating process, cannot defeat a president who the right wing of the party sees as extremely beatable, that part of the party will be furious. Some on the far right can stomach nominating Romney if it means winning back the White House, but nominating somebody who they view as far too liberal and still losing is a very different story for them.

If Romney loses the general election, the activist wing of the Republican Party will see Obama's reelection as being due to Romney being too liberal. They will probably be wrong about this as Obama's reelection, should it occur, will probably be due to an improving economy, higher than expected African American turnout, a well-run campaign, or any number of other factors including widespread fear of the extremists in the Republican Party. Nonetheless, the activist right wing will redouble their efforts to nominate radical conservatives often with little experience in governance. This will lead to a more ideologically pure, but politically less relevant Republican Party. This will be good news, from a tactical, angle for the Democratic Party, but will also contribute to instability, anger and conflict within the political system.

The impact of this election on the Republican Party is potentially very significant. The primary season, which is now winding down, demonstrated how easily the Republican Party can back itself into a corner where their support dwindles and skews older and whiter in a country that is growing younger and less white. A Romney victory may not change that, but a Romney defeat could exacerbate that situation as the activist wing of the party will take away all the wrong lessons.