

Does America Need an Angry President?

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When the 2012 election is finally concluded, the current popularity of Rick Santorum among Republican voters will probably be viewed as part of the continuum of enthusiasm for various right-wing politicians who were unable to muster enough support to prevent Mitt Romney -- who is beginning to seem like the kind of plutocratic Energizer Bunny who just keeps going and going -- from eventually winning the nomination.

Santorum is nonetheless a fascinating political and cultural phenomenon, and while still a long shot, the only Republican candidate other than Romney with a chance of representing the GOP in November against President Barack Obama. Santorum's candidacy reflects the marriage of radical views on social issues with the anger and resentment towards an array of targets, that characterizes much of today's Republican Party.

Santorum's views on contraception, for example, are extreme, but also almost surreal. While it is not unusual to find politicians with conservative social views, Santorum's position on this issue seems more calculated to demonstrate the extent to which he is out of the American mainstream than to actually have an impact on policy. Santorum's anti-contraception views are so unpopular and unworkable that they likely serve no other purpose than proving to the Republican base that Santorum is indeed, the most retrograde candidate around.

Santorum has been out of the Senate for six years, but more significantly has not won an election since 2000. Moreover, Santorum's last experience as a candidate was being drubbed by an 18 point margin by Bob Casey Jr. After that defeat, Santorum spent much of the last six years in various parts of the far right movement, including the right-wing think tank community and Fox News. It is impressive that Santorum was able to keep his political future alive after such a resounding defeat in 2006, but he did so not by trying to learn from his defeat and understand the problems and challenges facing Americans, but by deepening his identity on the far right.

In addition to spending these six years in the reactionary wilderness, Santorum also seems to have embraced the anger and resentment that characterizes the right wing of the Republican Party. There may be several reasons for this, but losing an election, as an incumbent, by 18 points can lead to many reactions, among which one of the easiest is anger. It is this heady brew of anger and righteousness which makes Santorum resonate so well with his party's base while also making him almost uniquely unfit to be president.

In the unlikely event that Santorum becomes the Republican nominee the election may well turn out to be substantially about right-wing anger, but even if Romney is the nominee, the Republican campaign will still have to address the anger issue. Right-wing anger has fueled the Tea Party movement and been at the core of the party's message for most of the time since the

last months of the 2008 campaign. Anger, and a corresponding desire to provoke liberals and moderates, as an end in itself, explains much of the behavior of Republican presidential aspirants, not least Santorum.

Anger explains, for example, Santorum's views on contraception, and the place those views have come to take in his campaign. It is hard to imagine that any Republican strategist who seriously wanted to elect Santorum would suggest that Santorum stress, or even mention, his views on contraception and link contraception to the abortion debate, as Republicans have begun to either do or allow Democrats to do. If however, the candidate is motivated by his own anger, this behavior makes more sense.

During the general election, the difference in tone between President Obama and his Republican opponent will be hard to ignore. There are also, of course, many substantive differences between Obama and whoever his eventual opponent will be. Even if that opponent is the more moderate Romney, the two candidates will differ on most major policy issues as well as their retrospective evaluations of the Obama presidency. However, Americans will also have to decide whether or not they want an angry president who feels an acute, if mystifying, sense of victimization, and who will divide Americans, not simply as a necessary tool for winning in elections, but because that is his default political setting.

Critics of President Obama undoubtedly see him as divisive, but his rhetoric, at least, seeks to bring people together and speak to Americans as if we are one people with unified goals and aspirations. There has been very little of that kind of rhetoric from any of the Republican candidates, other than protestations regarding alleged class warfare by Democrats who have the radical notion that the very rich should be taxed at at least the same rate as other Americans. At a time when our country desperately needs to come together to solve our problems and move forward, no Republican candidate has bothered to put that simple and obvious idea at the center of their campaign. Americans may be worried about their jobs, unsure of the future or not satisfied with President Obama. All these things could help the Republicans, but not if they expect voters to be as angry as Rick Santorum.