

Weak Candidates Are the Least of the Republicans' Problems

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Now that the Rick Santorum boomlet seems to be ending, Republicans can return to the real work of bemoaning the state of the presidential primary. Republican dissatisfaction with the primary, which is coming from party stalwarts such as Haley Barbour and John McCain, is presented as concern that the drawn out primary will weaken the Republican chances against Obama, but it is also, implicitly, a recognition both that Mitt Romney, despite his potential appeal to those outside of the Republican base, is a weak candidate, and that no strong conservative candidate emerged during the primary season.

Republican leaders can bemoan the absence of a conservative candidate capable of doing the work and raising the money necessary to wage a serious campaign, as well as Mitt Romney's obvious vulnerabilities and foibles, but this critique misses the bigger picture and fails to identify the bigger structural and demographic problems that confront the Republican Party. The most serious problem facing the Republican Party is that they have backed themselves into the corner of being a party whose base, and to a large extent, entire electorate is white and born before about 1960. This, in of itself, would not be a problem, but in a country where every day the voting population is less white and, due to age replacement, less likely to have been born before 1960, it becomes a real concern.

The 2012 election cycle will be a difficult enough one for the Republicans as they seek to unseat a president who is a strong fundraiser and gifted politician presiding over an economy that is beginning to turn around. The Republicans have made this task even harder for themselves through tactical mistakes such as reframing the abortion issue as a debate about contraception, and by most likely nominating a candidate who makes George H. W. Bush look like a working class man of the people. These are problems which can be overcome through a strong campaign, but demographic inevitability is a more stubborn and resilient foe.

It is obvious that in order to survive, the Republican Party needs to adapt and broaden its appeal. It is certainly possible for the Republican Party to craft a message that appeals to a higher proportion of younger and nonwhite voters, but given the tone of today's Republican Party as well as the capture of that party by an older, whiter and more radical base, this will be quite difficult to do.

It is not unusual for the Democratic or Republican Party to be in a situation where keeping their base happy makes it difficult to win a general election, but overlaying this with being on the wrong side of demographic change is a qualitatively more vexing problem. The Republican has been an overwhelmingly white party for a generation, but this position was politically viable in a country that, as was the case in the 1980s and 1990s, still had a substantial white majority. Entrenching policy positions such as opposition to social programs of all stripes and increasingly

radical anti-immigration policies within the Republican platform was not as damaging twenty or thirty years ago as it is today. Today, however, the Republicans are stuck with those policies because any Republican who seeks to address these issues will face the rancor of an angry, older and overwhelmingly white Republican base.

The Republican Party may have an easier time competing for young, albeit young white, voters, but will still have to change, or at least downplay, their agenda on social policies. The best example of how age replacement works against the Republicans is the marriage equality issue. Opposition to marriage equality is considerably stronger among older voters as younger voters almost across the board are more comfortable with marriage equality. Recent victories for marriage equality in states like California, New York and Maryland suggest that within a few years opposition to this civil right will be an anachronism, but an anachronism which Republicans seeking to win primaries still will be forced to embrace.

The extent to which the Republican Party has become a party of older white voters is one of the major causes for the field of Republican candidates being so weak. The youngest of the last four candidates standing may be a boyish 53, but his views on social issues are rooted firmly in another generation, and indeed another century, although not the 20th. It is impossible to look at or listen to the other candidates without being aware of their lack of connections to people in their 20s-40s. Newt Gingrich has returned to the public arena after a hiatus of almost fifteen years. Romney is a grandfather who, although having a youthful appearance for his age, has the mannerisms and presentation of somebody from another era. The only exception to this is Ron Paul, who does better among younger voters than the other Republicans, but this is most likely due to his positions on issues ranging from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to personal freedom being so different than the rest of his party.

Complaining about the quality of the current field of candidates or about the nastiness of the Republican primary is a natural reaction from party leaders who are almost certainly disappointed by the likelihood that their party will squander this opportunity to unseat a vulnerable president, but until the party finds away to appeal to 21st century Americans, weak candidates in 2012 will be the least of their problems.