

Does Mitt Romney Need a Sistah Souljah Moment?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 01/19/12 08:37 AM ET

One of the central lessons, as well as baffling questions, regarding the 2012 Republican primary season has been the weakness of the far right. 2012 was supposed to be the year that, building on the Tea Party movement and the 2010 elections, the far right was going to nominate one of its own for president and possibly win the general election. Instead, the Republican Party is well on its way to nominating a conventional, even relatively moderate, Republican who is committed to making the wealthy wealthier, but is not given to radical views on social issues or gratuitous anger towards poor or non-white people.

Moreover, the only candidate other than Mitt Romney to both raise enough money to be a legitimate candidate and finish strongly in the first two states is Ron Paul. Paul is an untraditional Republican with a range of views that cannot really be defined as consistent with the Tea Party wing of the party. Although Paul's views on social welfare policy make Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich look like Communists, Paul's views on international affairs and other domestic issues, most notably drug policy, are substantially different than those held by most of the far right.

The failure of any right wing Tea Party favorite to either build a strong campaign or win support from voters suggests that faction of the Republican Party does not enjoy broad support from the electorate. The decision by Tea Party favorites like Sarah Palin not even to get into the race reaffirms this notion. Nonetheless, the extremist wing of the Republican Party still is the public face of the party. This is partially due to the volume of right wing attacks on the president which still persist, the frequent outlandish statements from the far right which are, for some reason, still viewed as newsworthy and the dominance of extremists among Republicans in the House of Representatives.

The absence of a competitive primary means that Romney will be able to spend more of his time focusing on the general election campaign against President Obama. The election, due largely to the state of the economy, will be close, but Romney, at least in some respects starts at a disadvantage. He has spent much of the last three years seeking to appeal to a radical wing of his party, with declining national support, so as to secure the Republican nomination. Obama, who has faced no primary opposition, by contrast has spent most of the last three years, often to the chagrin of progressives in his own party, governing from the center. The President's moderate stands on health care reform, where he supported a policy much like the one Romney supported during his tenure as governor of Massachusetts, the Bush tax cuts and the distance Obama has put between himself and the left wing of his party, stand in contrast to Romney's recent actions. In an election that will likely be won or lost in the center, this is significant.

The Republican primary has demonstrated that the far right is not as powerful as once thought. Predictions that Romney could not survive the deep south because of his views on social issues or the particular brand of Christianity he practices are going to be proven wrong in the coming weeks. Four years ago, John McCain was cowed by the activists in his party into selecting a running mate who while keeping the right wing happy was unable to appeal to independents and those in the political center.

For Romney to appeal to these same voters, he needs to distance himself from the far right and show the electorate that he will not be beholden to the extremists who are so visible within the Republican Party. In short, Romney needs to have his [Sistah Souljah moment](#). Twenty years ago, Bill Clinton, then a conservative southern governor on his way to the nomination, further demonstrated his centrist credentials by criticizing controversial African American rapper Sistah Souljah. Expressing a similar statement about the Tea Party, Rush Limbaugh, the Birthers or some other visible right wing figure or group would help Romney accomplish the same thing.

While this would be a strategically wise decision to make, it is not clear that Romney will have the courage and confidence to do this. Since his 2008 campaign, Romney has shows himself to be hard working, resilient and driven, but he has rarely demonstrated political courage, a willingness to accept risk or controversy or awareness of the dangers of inflammatory rhetoric. These are not only what would be needed for Romney to understand the import of having his own Sistah Souljah moment, but qualities that would be needed should he become president. Additionally, although it is easy to assume that Romney's rightward drift is due to his political ambition, the possibility that he has simply become more conservative remains true. Although Romney's path to the 2012 has been easy so far, this is due more to the ineptitude or irrelevance of most of his opponents, but this is beginning to change. The next months will determine whether the GOP nominee who has not won an election since 2002 has the political skill necessary to pose a serious challenge to President Obama. Distancing himself from the far right would go a long way towards demonstrating this.