

The Republican Midterm Dilemma

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After the Democratic Party took back control of congress in 2006, the 2008 presidential election emerged not just as an opportunity, but also as a test for the Democrats. The 2006 election had defeated, but more importantly, discredited, the Republicans. Had the Democrats been unable to win in 2008, it therefore would have raised the questions of whether the Democrats could ever win, and what the point of the Democratic Party was. Fortunately, Barack Obama got elected president in 2008, so these questions have been avoided.

Ironically, the Republican Party, by portraying President Obama as seeking to bring about the socialist apocalypse, and by stressing the strength of anti-Obama among voters, has spun itself into a similar corner today. Raising expectations is never wise in politics, but the Republicans have done just that in the last eighteen months. They have made this more of a problem by overstating the danger represented by the Obama presidency.

This has led to a context where if the Republican tsunami of 2010 fails to materialize in November, even loyal Republican voters will be forced to ask some tough questions about the relevance and future of their party. Republican leaders will have to explain how the Republican Party -- with a dangerous socialist in the White House and such an enormous groundswell of support for the far right -- could not manage to get control of congress. Thus, anything less than a major Republican victory in November will raise the question that if the party cannot win when the Democratic president is doing so badly, when can they ever win? This is, of course, something of a political trick question, because the premise is grounded in Republican spin rather than reality, but it is a trick the Republicans have played on themselves. Creating and promoting these perceptions has been a short term and risky strategy, but it may have more serious long term consequences.

The Republicans are, in fact, scoring some political victories, of which Scott Brown's election to the senate remains the most impressive, but this is natural for this point in the political cycle. While the right has sought to portray these victories as evidence that we are on the cusp of another 1994, there is increasingly reason to believe this is not the case. Obama's poll numbers, which fell steadily through the last half of 2009, have been reasonably steady this year. The tea party movement has not brought new energy into the Republican Party or become a new force in American politics, but it may continue to derail the Republican Party from nominating electable candidates.

The Republican Party has added to their problems by taking policy positions, notably their almost blind allegiance to the health insurance, finance and oil industries, which have pushed voters away and made Republican attacks on Obama easier to dismiss, particularly for those in the political center. The Republican arguments that Obama's health care bill represented too much government intervention or that the Obama administration did not respond as well as they should have to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico were significantly less persuasive than they

might have been coming from a political party that more or less believed there was nothing wrong with health care in the US, and whose leaders continue to argue that we should allow companies to drill offshore with little or no regulation.

The anger and fear that many Americans feel towards the Obama administration is real. Obama, after all, very overtly campaigned on a theme of change, and change always scares some people. However, the Republican Party will remain unable to use this anger and fear to their advantage until they move away from the policies and positions which the American people have voted against in the last two elections. Thus, the main result of 18 months of calling the Obama administration extremists is that it is the Republicans themselves, especially if the tea partiers continue to influence nominations, who will seem like the extremists by the time November comes around.

If Republican gains are relatively minor in November, it is almost certain that some elements of the Republican leadership will declare victory anyway. One can easily imagine the bluster which will come from the Limbaugh, Palin and Steele wing of the party after the election almost regardless of the outcome. More thoughtful Republicans, however, will have to confront the failure of the party to take advantage of the opportunities presented during the first two years of the Obama presidency, and the strong possibility that two more years of that could cause real damage to their party.