

# What if the Republicans Lose in 2012?

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With the 2012 presidential election still 16 months away, it is still far too early to know who will win, or even who the Republican candidate will be. Nonetheless, while the road to reelection will not be easy for President Obama, it is certainly possible that he will get reelected. If that happens, analysts will undoubtedly point to the recovering economy, relatively solid, if cautious, foreign policy pursued by Obama, and to the flawed candidacy of Obama's yet unknown Republican opponent. There will be some truth to all these explanations, but this should not obscure the extent to which this election, in a normal political context would be the Republicans to lose.

Accordingly, if Obama gets reelected, it will raise serious questions about where the Republican Party is heading and how they managed to miss this opportunity to win the election. Although the election is still a long way off, exploring some of these questions now, before they get overwhelmed by the specifics of the upcoming campaign, can be fruitful.

Should Obama win, Republicans could blame the nominee, regardless of who it is -- Mitt Romney for being insufficiently conservative, Michele Bachmann for being too amateurish or frighteningly right wing, Tim Pawlenty for being too boring, or whoever else ultimately wins the nomination for some other flaw. This, however, will be an exercise in avoidance allaying responsibility for a Republican defeat at an imperfect, even weak, nominee and it obscures other significant questions. The real questions Republicans should ask themselves if they lose in 2012 is how they managed to lose a presidential election during a time of poor economic conditions with the country embroiled in at least two, and possibly three, wars. The corollary question they will need to ask is whether their strategy of attacking President Obama nonstop for four years while offering few useful solutions and giving in to the party's most extreme and ugly elements was really the wise decision. If the answer to the last question is no, the Party will have to determine how and why they allowed that to happen.

There is already reason to believe that the Republicans are paying a price for this strategy. The failure of any Republican presidential candidate to raise significant funds for their campaign, the awkward efforts otherwise potentially strong centrist candidates like Romney and Pawlenty have had to make to keep the far right wing of the party satisfied and the presence in the race of far right candidates with few serious qualifications for president like Herman Cain and even Michele Bachmann all suggest the Party is not driven by serious strategic thought.

Republican strategists eyeing the field and seeing Obama's vulnerability must feel as if they are watching a car crash in slow motion, desperate, but unable, to grab the steering

wheel and do something. A moderate Mitt Romney as the nominee, a Republican record in congress of doing something besides yelling at the President or some ability to quiet down the far right of the party would all be valuable assets for the Republicans going into this race. Despite the opportunities presented to them, the Republicans have none of these assets and must run on their recent record of negativity and extremism.

If Obama wins reelection it will be substantially due to his ability to win the center of the electorate due, largely, to the inability of the Republican candidate, and party, to communicate their qualifications, even their seriousness. The strongest opponents of Obama will not need much convincing in this regard, but the administration seems to be betting that a lot of other Americans will need convincing. If the Republican nominating season continues the way it is going now, this will not look like a bad bet at all.

The Republican primary campaign also demonstrates that perhaps more than ever, it is not possible to speak of the Republican Party, or for that matter the Democratic Party, as if it is an actual entity able to make or enforce decisions, or exercise any meaningful leadership. Both parties, at the elite level, are essentially loose affiliations of generally like minded ambitious politicians who are able to use various media to communicate their message and therefore have no need for the party itself. The party also consists of generally equally disunified activists and donors who have different priorities and loyalties within the party. This problem is slightly less acute for the Democrats this year because as the party that controls the presidency they do not have a competitive primary and have a party leadership in the White House that has some real power and influence.

The vaunted Republican ability to fall in line quickly behind a candidate seems to have disappeared in 2012, perhaps another victim of the communication technology which politicians like Sarah Palin wield so expertly. A Republican loss in November, however, may cause serious thinkers in that Party to bring back this type of discipline and leadership from the top. Efforts to do this will meet with strong resistance from some in the Party, meaning the Republican problems if they lose in 2012, could be quite serious.