

Is Anybody Really Shocked by Rick Perry's Hunting Camp Controversy?

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One of the most intriguing questions surrounding the [word painted on a rock](#) in Texas Governor Rick Perry's hunting camp is not whether or not the rock was painted over, or even whether or not the governor is a racist, but why the tone of so much of the media coverage of this story is one of such great, perhaps even genuine, surprise. Is anybody really shocked that a right wing governor who has never sought or received African American support, almost never sincerely said or done anything to suggest that racial equality is important to him and who has closely aligned himself with a movement whose members have frequently crossed over into overt racism, has a disturbingly high comfort level with racist words?

This incident has occurred in an American politics environment that remains deeply racially polarized. The U.S. today has more racial and ethnic diversity than ever, but our two party system consists of one party which has substantial support among all racial and religious groups, as well as among gays and lesbians, and one that is essentially a party for straight white Christian Americans. This may be an insensitive thing to say about the Republican Party; and it is not 100% the case as there are non-whites, non-Christians and gay people who support the Republican Party, but they represent a very small minority of Republican voters. This is also something that is rarely discussed by the media, or even by politicians of either party.

The overwhelmingly white, straight and Christian membership and electoral base of the Republican Party creates a self-perpetuating cycle. Because, for example, there are so few African Americans in the Republican Party, Republican politicians don't need to do anything to appeal to African American voters, thus making the party even less attractive to African American voters and making the Republican Party even more appealing to racists. Accordingly, while it is wrong to say that all, or even most, Republicans are racist, the question of whether or not it is a more hospitable environment for racists should at least be discussed.

Similarly, Republican politicians are far less concerned about anti-gay bigotry because a significant proportion of their electorate are overt homophobes, while very few Republican voters are gay or lesbian. Democratic politicians, regardless of their true views on issues like marriage equality, must at least call for a civil discussion of the issues, while Republican politicians can stand by idly while nasty slurs against gay people are thrown around. The latest example of this occurred at the recent debate among the Republican presidential aspirants when all the candidates stood quietly and meekly while [a soldier was booed](#) by the audience because he was gay.

In this context the current controversy around Rick Perry seems less surprising. If Perry is a racist, and the kind of person who would leave racist slurs painted on rocks in his hunting camp, it is far less likely that he would have risen to prominence in today's Democratic Party. Even if Perry is not a racist, it is hard to imagine a similar situation not becoming front page news earlier in the career of a Democratic politician who would have had a more difficult time avoiding bringing African American guests to his hunting ground. Thus, the Republican Party is a significantly better environment for enabling racist behavior than the Democratic Party where there are too many African Americans around to let that kind of thing occur unnoticed. Moreover, there is little accountability for racist behavior in the Republican Party because so few African Americans vote in Republican Primaries; and the overwhelmingly white electorate that votes in these primaries has not shown that racial sensitivity is an important issue for them.

Most of the coverage of this situation has focused on how it will affect Rick Perry's candidacy. Sadly, the consensus seems to be that while it is another blow to a floundering candidacy, should Perry survive these weeks, this incident will not be a major issue in a Republican primary because of the overwhelmingly white Republican primary electorate. This analysis is accurate, but it is also frivolous and ignores some other significant points. One question that has not been addressed is how a candidate could have been courted so aggressively by so many Republican leaders when this bit of racist baggage could not have been unknown. Perhaps the Republican operatives and donors who courted him did not think it was a big deal. Perhaps none of the people who had been to that camp thought a racist slur painted on a rock was noteworthy. In either case it is a reminder that one of our two major parties remains a party that, with precious few exceptions, is still by and for white Americans only.