

A consensus is emerging that President Obama did much better in the second presidential debate than in the first one a few weeks ago. With his strong showing on Tuesday night, Obama has again solidified his position as the frontrunner and moved another step closer to reelection. Despite his tendency to talk over the moderator and the president, and at times to bully the former, Republican hopeful Mitt Romney did not perform terribly in the debate. He made a respectable effort to answer the questions, provide some specifics and criticize the President's record.

The problem with Romney's debate performance, therefore, was not what he said on Tuesday evening, it was that he presented his views and answers as if he were asked to speak to these questions for the first time. By ignoring his record of statements and claims over the last few years of campaigning, Romney, for the moment, was able to present himself, at least at times, as a reasonable and thoughtful man. For Romney, the problem is that most voters are not seeing him for the first time and are aware of his and his party's record and statements.

Romney did not lose this debate last night -- he lost this debate, and probably this election, a few years ago when he decided that it would be easier to get the Republican nomination if he embraced the right wing ideology and magical economic thinking that is so popular among his party's base. It is not clear, and probably not important, whether he did this out of political expedience or genuine belief, but it put him in a very difficult position from which to run against Obama.

Romney's answers on taxes and even the economy, for example, were not terrible answers. They were conservative, but not unreasonable. The problem with these answers is that they fly in the face of the things Romney has been saying on the campaign trail for over a year. In a debate setting perhaps Romney believes that [under his plan](#) "The top 5 percent will continue to pay 60 percent, as they do today," and the he's "not looking to cut taxes for wealthy people," but that is not exactly what voters have been hearing from Romney and his party for the last several years. Similarly Romney's [assertion](#) that he understands that "if you're going to have women in the workforce, that sometimes they need to be more flexible," is not the kind of thing we have been hearing from the Republican Party this year. It is also striking that in 2012 Romney actually said "if you're going to have women in the workforce," as if that were a notion that was being debated somewhere.

This debate was particularly bad for Romney because it confirmed one of his strongest vulnerabilities, that he has no principles and will say anything to get elected. It is possible that Romney's debate performance not only failed to convince many undecided voters, but that it also dampened enthusiasm for Romney among the right wing base of the Republican Party who, three weeks before Election Day, saw their candidate, who they never really trusted anyway, running away from Republican positions on taxes and other domestic issues.

When he first became a national candidate, more than five years ago, Romney appeared to be the best and perhaps last hope of the moderate wing of the Republican Party. His business background and moderate views on social issues gave him the potential to undo some of the

damage the far right was doing to the party. By the time he wrapped up the 2012 Republican nomination, he could no longer plausibly present himself as a moderate in any sense of the word. Whether that was due to pandering, evolving views or political expedience is immaterial. It is the hole Romney dug for himself.

Last night Romney tried to climb out of that hole, but he did it months too late to be taken seriously. This election is not over, and Romney could still win. Another poor debate performance for Obama, continuing poor economic news or some unforeseen gaffe or event of a devastating nature could still tilt the election toward Romney, but these scenarios are all somewhat unlikely. If, as expected, Obama gets reelected, it will largely be because Romney decided several years ago that an expedient approach to the Republican primary was more valuable than being a plausible general election candidate. Recognizing this is undoubtedly very frustrating for Romney; and it was that frustration which we all saw on his face last night when President Obama reminded the candidate and the country of the wide gap between what Romney said last night and what he has been traveling around the country saying for almost half a decade.