

The Republican Party After the Election

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As the midterm election approaches, rarely a day goes by when a Republican candidate does not say something that progressives view as outrageous and which a generation ago many Republicans would have viewed similarly. In the last few weeks, a Republican congressional candidate in California [called for the abolishment of public schools](#), another House candidate, this time from Ohio, offered an [extremely half-hearted apology](#) for being photographed wearing a Nazi uniform while seeming oblivious as to why this might be offensive to many Americans, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, a potential presidential candidate in 2012, [has continued to refer to President Obama's "Kenyan, anti-colonial worldview."](#)

To some extent, this reflects the nature of American politics today, where no claim or accusation is too bizarre, or requires any evidence whatsoever to be taken at least somewhat seriously by many in the media. Widespread voter anger has been channeled into a hostility, meanness and irrationality that has defined not just a few individual campaigns but almost the entire political climate of the country. Much of this has come from the group of anti-government, generally far-right extremists, which can be lumped together under the term Tea Party. This is a little misleading, because while too much ink, or its digital equivalent, has already been spilled trying to figure out what the Tea Party really means, its close financial and political ties to the Republican Party makes the answer to this question very clear.

These candidates, as well as others such as Christine O'Donnell and Sharron Angle, have come to define today's Republican Party. While many progressives are undoubtedly worried about what will happen if some or all of these people get elected, it is not impossible that some Republicans, if only for strategic reasons, share these concerns. Once elected, these candidates will likely be overmatched, unable to get anything done and prone to even more revelations about their past as well as wacky statements. None of that will be good for the Republican Party. Supporting any kind of extremist view point or statement that was critical of the president and generated enthusiasm for the Republican Party, or one of its factions, was a short term strategy that allowed the Republican Party to bounce back quickly from its resounding defeat in 2008, but it is unlikely to be a fruitful strategy in even the medium term.

Exploiting voter anger and concern over a range of things, primarily the economy, and channeling it towards anti-Obama vitriol, often of a quite offensive kind, allowed the Republican Party to become relevant, with a real chance of winning control of one or both houses of congress, far quicker than many, even many within the Republican Party, would have thought in January of 2009. However, this approach has led to a Republican Party that is not only dominated by its most extreme wing, but where individuals with nothing in their backgrounds to suggest even a modicum of governing experience or ability are almost certain to get elected to high office.

The strange statements, beliefs, views and sheer ignorance of many Republican candidates may be in that grey area between damaging and amusing during the campaign, but once in office will lean much more towards damaging. Sarah Palin's ascendancy on the national political stage has led some candidates to believe that ignorance is a political asset and that knowledge itself is somehow suspect. This may work when seeking to appeal to an angry electorate, but is unlikely to be as popular once these people take office. Christine O'Donnell may be able to finesse her failure to think of a single recent Supreme Court Case with which she disagreed while she is a candidate, but preparation, hard work and knowledge is essential for anybody seeking to pass legislation of any kind in Washington. If candidates like O'Donnell are elected, they will likely continue to embarrass and begin to isolate the Republican Party through their strange and extremist views, and will also almost guarantee the failure of that party to accomplish anything.

Being the party of voter anger has proven to be a surprisingly effective short term political strategy, but it is a terrible governing strategy. What was left of the more thoughtful, if still conservative, leadership of the Republican Party after the Bush years has been completely defeated in the almost two years since Obama took office. The checks on the party's fringes are no longer there, so people who like to dress up as Nazis, advocate abolishing all public education, want to end Social Security and believe that any economic policy to the left of Ayn Rand is synonymous with Stalinism have emerged as the new face of the Republican Party.