

Romney and the Decline of the Tea Party

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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With Mitch Daniels confirming that he will not run for president, and new [polls showing](#) that Mitt Romney is the clear frontrunner for the Republican nomination in 2012, there is a real possibility that the 2012 primary will be over before it really starts. There is a small possibility that one of the candidates like Michele Bachmann or Newt Gingrich will galvanize the far right and make a race of it, and an even smaller possibility that a new candidate like Chris Christie will make a late entrance into the race and win the nomination, but with about eight months before the first vote is cast, Romney is increasingly likely to be the nominee.

This is something of a disappointment for many who were looking forward to the spectacle of a hotly contested GOP nominating race where various extremist, eccentric and seemingly unelectable candidates would compete to challenge President Obama in the fall of 2012. We are all going to have to live without seeing Mike Huckabee, Gingrich, Palin, Ron Paul, Bachmann, Herman Cain and others compete for the nomination as these candidates have decided not to run or struggled to demonstrate their viability while Romney has begun to move away from the rest of the candidates.

Should Romney, as is increasingly likely, win the nomination, it will be a severe defeat for the Tea Party faction of the party. In order to become the party's leading candidate, Romney has had to move ahead of numerous Republican candidates with much more solid credentials with the activist wing of the Republican Party. Although Romney has sought to portray himself as a true conservative, his credentials in this area particularly on social and domestic issues simply do not compare to those of Bachmann, Huckabee, Palin and others. Romney is not a fundamentalist Christian, nor is he given to extremist and provocative statements like some of his opponents. Romney seems like a conservative from another generation primarily concerned with making his rich friends richer, rather than with taking radical positions on social policies. In this regard, he looks a bit like George H. W. Bush.

Two years ago, it seemed as if real change was afoot in the Republican Party as the radicals, exemplified by the Tea Party activists were poised to take control of the GOP. Getting from that point to the real possibility that Mitt Romney, who as of 2007 was almost a caricature of an elite liberal Republican, and whose credentials on the far right are very questionable, will wrap up the nomination early in less than two years is a surprise and a clear defeat for the radical wing of the Republican Party.

Romney, of course, has sought to present himself as a true conservative in order to secure the nomination. He began this towards the end of the 2008 primary campaign in which he finished second to John McCain, and has increased his efforts during the intervening

years. These efforts have been sufficiently successful to win Romney support from many in his party, but he has failed to persuade many of the most radical in his party that he is conservative enough. However, this has not stopped him from emerging as the front runner for the Republican presidential nomination.

Two-and-a-half years into the administration of President Barack Obama, a president who has been attacked by the far right as a dangerous socialist, whose presidency stimulated a conservative revival, the likely candidate to oppose him in 2012 is a liberal Republican who as governor of Massachusetts passed a health care bill similar to the one Obama passed nationally in 2010, and who, until becoming a national figure, presented himself as a moderate business oriented Republican with a good understanding of the economy.

Romney's success is partially due to the failure of the Tea Party to unify behind one candidate early in the nominating process, but that only partially explains his success. Obviously, Romney also has spent the last months raising money and building an organization while most of his opponents have been just talking, but since the November 2010 election, which was a moment of triumph for the Republican Party and its right wing, the party has made a series of missteps including seeking to make the killing of Osama Bin Laden a partisan issue, spending too much time discussing the President's birth and birth certificate and supporting efforts to disassemble Medicare.

All of this has damaged the previously ascendant right wing and led to the waning popularity of the Tea Party and the extreme right wing in general. One Tea Party icon, Glenn Beck, has already lost his show on Fox and is rapidly retreating into richly deserved obscurity. Others, notably Sarah Palin have become sufficiently unpopular that they are no longer plausible national candidates; and the one major candidate least acceptable to many Tea Party activists has emerged as the frontrunner for the Republican nomination.