

The Republican Party and the Future for the Democrats

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The Republican victory in the midterm election has once again placed that party firmly at the center of American politics. They are no longer the not-entirely-relevant, occasionally entertaining and often frightening sideshow that they were in late 2008 through much of 2009, but are again the driving force in national politics. This creates a frustrating dynamic for the Democratic Party because their ability to forge their own future is somewhat limited. Instead, to a substantial extent, their future depends on the direction taken and decisions made by the Republican Party.

The Republican Party was pulled even further to the right in the most recent election cycle than it had been in previous years. The party has been all but taken over by what only a decade or so would have been considered its right-wing fringe. The line between Tea Party and establishment Republican has been sufficiently blurred that it has no meaning other than for purposes of spin for Republicans seeking to present their party as more moderate than it is.

This new reality will likely lead to one of two scenarios. The first, and more hopeful, for the Democrats, is that the Republicans will continue to be a party of the far right, one where once well-respected mainstream Republicans like Senators Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Richard Lugar of Indiana are no longer welcome. In this scenario, the increasing ugliness of the radical right wing of the Republican Party will continue to alienate broad swaths of the American electorate, leading to a Democratic rebound and the reelection of President Obama in 2012.

This scenario can be summed up by the reaction from some Democrats to the heightened political profile of Sarah Palin since the election. Palin has been extremely visible since the election with her name frequently floated as a possible presidential candidate in 2012. These Democrats seem to be excited about this prospect seeing Palin as an easily beatable, unqualified, none-too-bright radical with no ability to appeal beyond the Republican Party base.

Democrats who are excited about the prospect of a Palin presidential bid should proceed with great caution, because there is a second possible scenario for the Democrats that is not nearly as positive as the first one. If the last quarter century of Republican Politics have demonstrated anything it is that the party's capacity to move rightward and still win elections should never be underestimated. Palin has formidable political skills, has refused to let her lack of knowledge, experience or interest in gaining more expertise stop her and is a popular, if polarizing political figure.

Nonetheless, Palin would still be all but unelectable in most political settings. However, 2010 was not a normal political year; and there is a good chance 2012 will not be either. This is because the economic downturn has continued. If it drags on for another two years it very well may drag President Obama and the Democrats down again. The unemployment rate has stayed between 9-10.6 percent for almost all of Obama's presidency. If that does not decline

substantially in the next 18 months or so, 2012 will be anything but a normal year; and Palin and the right wing of the Republican Party will be the beneficiary of that.

Although, the Democrats are no longer the dominant force in politics that they were a year ago, the party still controls the presidency and one house of congress, so has some ability to influence outcomes. The lessons of the last two years can provide some guidance here. First, it is still important to portray the Democrats as being in the mainstream and the Tea Party Republicans as the fringe. While this may appear empirically obvious to most Democrats, it is foolish to assume angry and concerned voters looking for answers to painful questions will see this right away, so effort and resources need to be devoted to detailing the Republican extremism and what it represents.

Second, the Republican Party can no longer be depended upon to overplay their hand and pursue policies that are offensive to most Americans. More accurately, while the Republican Party can be depended upon to pursue this path, it can no longer be assumed that voters will be upset by this and come running back to the Democrats, so standing back and waiting is not a wise strategy either. The enduring economic downturn, high unemployment and scant hope for the future have created a degree of rancor towards government that is qualitatively different than in previous elections.

Doing these things will not by themselves stop the Republicans if the economy is still bad during the next two years, but it will be a start. The Democrats, on the other hand, might get lucky. The economy could begin to turn around, thus changing the mood of the electorate and allowing the president to take credit for his work and all but guarantee his reelection. Hoping to get lucky, so to speak, is not a serious political strategy. These next two years are going to be tough, which will only make the sense of lost opportunity during 2009 and 2010 feel even more difficult.