

# The Republican Party -- Abandoning the Center

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A few months ago, Paul Ryan was considered something of a rising star in the Republican Party as he sought to address the federal deficit through serious, non-ideological approaches. Ryan created an image for himself as a thoughtful centrist interested in tough solutions to tough problems. It turns out that was mostly just spin. As people became more familiar with Ryan's plan, it became clear that he was essentially just another Republican seeking to balance the budget by placing an unfair burden on lower income Americans. Like most in his party, Ryan sought to cut programs for poor Americans while refusing to raise taxes on the wealthiest, thus forcing those who have already sacrificed the most, to sacrifice even more.

None of this is particularly unusual. Republicans frequently craft right-wing solutions to various policy challenges and seek to present them as centrist and non-partisan. Ryan's plan might have raised Ryan's profile, helped him become more of a national figure and done little else, if his plan had simply been another restatement of Republican budget goals. However, Ryan's plan went one step further, calling for replacing Medicare with a voucher system that would amount to privatizing Medicare. Medicare is genuinely not a partisan issue, because seniors across the political spectrum, including in the large, and often overlooked, center rely on it. By threatening Medicare, Ryan's plan mobilized a large number of people in the center against his plan, and at least for now, his party. The Republican's paid for this in a recent special election for the House of Representatives in New York State and now have to defend themselves against charges of being against Medicare, and therefore seniors, as the 2012 election cycle is beginning.

Since 2008, much of the political energy in the U.S. has been on the far right as the Tea Party movement rose to prominence, before declining somewhat in recent months; various Republican politicians such as Michele Bachmann, Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich have competed with each other to make increasingly outrageous statements and claims; and terms like socialism have been thrown around as accusations more frequently in recent years than in any time for several decades. In this context, it is easy to forget that the center is still relevant in American politics. In 2010, the Republicans appealed to these voters because President Barack Obama had been unsuccessful, substantively or rhetorically, in his first two years in crafting an appeal to these voters.

In recent months this has begun to change as Obama has done several things that have been broadly popular in the political center, most notably overseeing the killing of Osama bin Laden, while the Republicans have become identified with a plan to privatize Medicare. These two events have helped make those in the political center not just

relevant (they have always been extremely relevant) but visible again. Moreover, both of these story lines have helped Obama and his party while hurting the Republican Party.

The Republican Party has had a strange relationship with the political middle in recent years. Since John McCain nominated Sarah Palin as his running mate in 2008, the leadership of the party has focused almost all of its attention on the party's base. The leadership of the Republican Party has indulged the bizarre theories held by many in the base about, for example, Obama's place of birth; has supported policies that were never likely to win much support outside of the base; allowed the Tea Party movement to frame the Republican Party as angry, intolerant and extreme; has allowed Republican politicians and activists to indulge in rhetoric that is sure to alienate anybody in the political center; and has supported unpopular ideas such as privatizing Medicare. All of these decisions created political energy that brought the party back from the brink of irrelevancy after Obama beat McCain, but are now beginning to haunt the party as they seek to appeal to the center.

The Democrats, for their part, have had a very conventional relationship with these voters. Obama, as most nominees do, moved rapidly to the center as it became clear he would be his party's nominee in 2008, and has continued to govern with attention to the political center since becoming president in 2009. Accordingly, many progressives are, usually with good reason, critical of how moderate Obama's policies have been. Obama's concern for the views of the center may have disappointed progressives and led to policy mistakes and missed opportunities, but it has not been an unusual presidential strategy.

Ryan does not deserve all the blame for this, but his plan is illustrative of a broader Republican tendency to think only of their ideological base. The Republicans seem to have been so busy catering to the far right that they may lose an election against a president embroiled in three wars while unemployment hovers around 9%, because they have alienated the center. This would be an extraordinary break for the Obama and the Democrats.