

A Perry or Bachmann Nomination May Not Be Good for Democrats

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Rick Perry has shaken up the Republican presidential primary because he seems to be taking the mantle of Tea Party favorite and far right darling away from Michele Bachmann. Before Perry joined the race, Bachmann seemed to be the most likely to be the last Tea Party candidate standing against Mitt Romney. Now Perry is more likely to be in that position. On the issues, Perry is not more moderate than Bachmann. Both are fundamentalist extremists with radical anti-government views who have evinced little understanding of a modern state or economy and demonstrated little interest in or knowledge of foreign affairs other than their belief in a strong America. Perry seems to have eclipsed Bachmann's popularity because he is less prone to gaffes than Bachmann, is slightly better at keeping his mouth shut sometimes and is enjoying something of a bump in the polls because he is the new candidate about whom voters may not yet know very much.

Perry and Bachmann have a great deal in common and, accordingly, can both be easily portrayed as dangerous, and probably slightly nutty, extremists in a general election. For this reason, many Democrats are hopeful that one of these two will be the eventual Republican nominee, rather than Romney who is more moderate and would probably be a stronger candidate against President Obama in the general election.

Democrats should be wary of this kind of thinking for several reasons. First, given that the country is still very polarized with so much energy on the extreme right, a candidate like Bachmann or Perry could mobilize voters and lay the groundwork for future, more polished, radical extremists. Second, and more significantly, the 2012 election is likely to occur with unemployment hovering around 9%, the country still engaged in three unpopular and increasingly endless seeming wars and a debt crisis that is not going away. In that environment, any incumbent, even one running against a radical with only the most tenuous understanding of history, the world or the economy, will still be vulnerable, so an Obama victory is not guaranteed regardless of who ends up being his Republican opponent.

Perry, and particularly Bachmann, would certainly be weaker candidates than Romney, but given the context in which the election will occur, it is not at all clear that Democrats should hope for the slightly less electable nominee, if that person would make an almost unimaginably bad president as Bachmann and Perry would.

There is another reason why having Perry or Bachmann win the Republican nomination is not something for which Democrats or progressives should hope. Should Bachmann or

Perry be the Republican nominee in 2012, it is almost guaranteed that the general election will be a continuation of the ugly and confrontational rhetoric and politics that have been part of the right wing playbook since President Obama took office. Terms like un-American, treasonous and the like will continue to play a prominent role, not just in our politics, but in a presidential campaign. Perry or Bachmann will run with the certainty of the religious fanatic who just knows that his or her side has the support of God while the other side is deeply, irreparably and deliberately wrong. While this style of politics certainly did not originate with the right wing in 2009, it has come to play a bigger role than ever before among much of the anti-Obama movement.

At this time, the U.S. does not need a campaign which will further tear at the country's already tattered social fabric, but this is precisely what a Perry or Bachmann campaign, even if it ends up losing, will do. Rather than a divisive campaign, regardless of who wins, the country would benefit from a campaign which seeks to unify the U.S. in an effort to build support for the difficult challenges which we must overcome in the years ahead. It is worth remembering that while President Obama has been a disappointment to many and has generated real enmity from a substantial minority of voters, his campaign in 2008 sought to bring the country together rather than exploit its divisions for short term electoral gain. This was somewhat surprising given the intensity of anti-Bush sentiment on the left, during the Bush years. From the time he became a national figure, Obama's message was one of unity and finding common ground. His faith in this approach has made him a less effective president, but it spared the country some nastiness and division in 2008. Unfortunately, Perry and Bachmann will probably be the polar opposite from Obama as candidates if they win the nomination.

Democrats should be aware that preserving some sense of national unity and some broader social cohesion is more important than a slightly better chance of President Obama being reelected. Even if Obama is reelected, it is unlikely that he would be able to govern over a country that would be even more divided, with tensions and distrust running even higher than is currently the case.