

What the 2012 Elections Portend for the Future of the Republican Party

Written by Iwan Morgan

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IWAN MORGAN, NOV 22 2012

Having won the presidency, the House and the Senate in the 2004 elections, Republicans were confident that they had finally succeeded in their long quest to become America's natural party of government. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas asserted that they were now 'a permanent majority party for the future.' [1] Eight years on, however, the Republican Party's prospects look far from rosy. Based on its performance in the 2012 elections, many within the Grand Old Party (GOP) are questioning whether it can again capture the presidency without a significant overhaul of its right-wing agenda in order to appeal to groups in the electorate beyond its core base of supporters.

The 2012 Vote

The voting data for the 2012 presidential election make bleak reading for the Republicans. Mitt Romney won a majority of votes cast by whites (59-39 percent), men (52-45 percent), people with an annual income above \$50,000 (53-45 percent) and Americans aged over 65 (56-44 percent), but the good news ends there for the GOP. [2] Barack Obama carried the other key demographics: he won a majority of votes cast by women (55-44 percent), the 18-29 age group (60-37 percent), African Americans (93-7 percent), Latinos (71-27 percent), Asian Americans (74-25 percent), and people with an annual income below \$50,000 (60-38 percent). Meanwhile, the Democrats extended their Senate majority by two seats to 55-45, thwarting Republican hopes of retaking that chamber. Even Republican success in retaining control of the House of Representatives was achieved with a marginally smaller share of the popular vote than the Democrats (49-50 percent).

To remain competitive the Republicans need to expand their appeal beyond their 2012 voter base. Their lack of support from three groups is a particular cause for concern: women, who constituted 53 percent of total voters; the young, who are likely to carry forward their partisan affiliation into middle age; and Latinos, who made up more than 10 percent of voters for the first time and whose voter share will continue to grow. In the particular case of Latinos, their support has turned California into a safe blue state in every election since 1992, and was instrumental in Obama winning the swing states of Florida, Virginia, Colorado and Nevada in 2012, and could put Arizona, Georgia, and even the biggest red state of Texas in Democratic sights as their voting numbers grow over the second decade of this century.

The Choices Facing the GOP

Fundamentally the Republican Party faces a choice of two wholly different courses: stand firm to its conservative course or develop a more moderate agenda.

The first option is not as irrational as it may appear but it is a short-term strategy at best. The Republicans are likely to keep control of the House of Representatives for some time owing to the power of incumbency and the advantage gained from favourable redistricting in states with Republican governors (31 in total, with big gains recorded in 2010). Significantly only 11 of the 87 Republican freshmen elected in the unprecedented midterm sweep of 2010 lost their seats in 2012. The GOP's prospects of retaking the Senate in 2014 are promising – especially as the president's party habitually performs very badly in the second-term midterms (notably in 2006, 1986, and 1958 – with

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1998 the sole exception to this trend). Finally, Republican prospects of regaining the presidency in 2016 are by no means negligible, especially as only once has the same party won three consecutive presidential victories since 1945 (the GOP in 1980, 1984, and 1988). Indeed they will be bright if the economy does not achieve a strong recovery after eight years with a Democrat in the White House (something by no means assured).

Nevertheless, the demographic clock is working against the GOP. The conservative strategy may work in the short-term but does not offer prospect of extended success. There are simply not enough angry, old white voters to build an election-winning base as the electorate is growing younger, more ethnically diverse, and more tolerant. On the last point, the Republican advantage on socio-moral issues, particularly evident in 2004, appears to be diminishing. As an indicator of this, Maine, Maryland and Washington legalized same-sex marriages and Minnesota rejected a constitutional ban on such unions by popular-vote referendum in 2012, the first such decisions by voters rather than courts. Moreover, Colorado and Washington legalized marijuana for recreational purpose, an electoral first not only for the US but also the world.

The alternative option is to pursue a more moderate agenda, possibly based on fiscal conservatism and social libertarianism. This would enable the Republicans to soften their stance on illegal immigrants, which has alienated Latinos. It would mean retreating from insistence that abortion should be outlawed to embrace acceptance of its legality in the first trimester of pregnancy and in other circumstances necessary to safeguard the mother's life. Their stand on this issue especially alienated unmarried women, among whom Obama had a 38 percent lead compared to 12 percent for all women. They could also support measures to help increase the access of the young to educational advancement, notably college tuition credits.

The moderate strategy is easier to conceive than to implement. The party's activist base remains strongly conservative, and outside groups like the Tea Party, anti-tax organizations, and the Christian right would resist any deviation from the old orthodoxy. As Mitt Romney discovered, there is no certainty of controlling maverick congressional candidates from making outlandish statements on abortion rights, which would perpetuate the party's 'war on women' image. Finally, whatever moderate changes the Republicans made with regard to their agenda on immigration, women's rights, and government assistance to the young, the likelihood is that the Democrats would always be able to outbid them with more progressive policies on all these fronts.

Who will be the GOP's 2016 Standard-bearer?

The answer to this question will indicate party's choice of course. If the next Republican presidential candidate is Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, this will be a clear signal of its intent to hew to a conservative course. The darling of the right because of his hawkish stance towards reducing the deficit through a combination of tax cuts and spending retrenchment as House Budget Committee chair, Ryan became the vice-presidential nominee in 2012 because Mitt Romney wanted to shore up his conservative credibility with the GOP base. In fact he brought nothing to the ticket in terms of widening its reach – nominating Senator Rob Portman of Ohio or Senator Marco Rubio of Florida might have better helped Romney carry these vital swing states. It is difficult to see Ryan having greater appeal in 2016 – other than as the beneficiary of a negative vote against the Democrats if the economic recovery remains weak.

The nomination of someone like Jeb Bush, brother of the forty-third president and former governor of Florida, would signal a shift to moderation. Bush is especially popular with Latinos, has a Mexican wife, and speaks Spanish. He is also a moderate on the role of government in the economy and social welfare and is not a hard-liner on abortion. Whether the party would accept him as an election-winning option is another matter and the Bush brand remains tarnished in the eyes of many voters because they identify George W. with the financial crisis that landed the US in its current economic mess.

Whither the GOP?

Created in 1854, the Republican Party became the nation's majority party in the Civil War era, a status it retained until the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was the minority party thereafter until the late 1960s. Since then, neither

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the Republican nor Democratic parties enjoyed majority status on a clear and consistent basis. Although the GOP came close to doing so in the Reagan era, in the mid-1990s, and in 2002-04, it always fell short – often because of overreaching on its conservative agenda. Whether the Democrats are poised to regain the majority status they enjoyed in the mid-twentieth century is as yet unclear but their prospects of doing so look at least feasible. It should be remembered, however, that the GOP was written off after landslide defeats in the 1936 and 1964 elections, but quickly bounced back. As yet it has suffered no defeats of comparable scale in contemporary times. Its real problem is that it is running behind the demographic clock of a changing American society. Until it can put itself abreast of this, the GOP faces a difficult future.

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Iwan Morgan is professor of US Studies at University College London. He has written extensively on US politics and history, especially pertaining to the presidency and to economic policy. His book *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (University Press of Kansas, 2009) won the American Politics Group's Richard Neustadt prize. He is the co-editor (with Robert Mason) of a forthcoming book, *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2013).

¹ Tom DeLay quoted in John Harris and Jim VandeHei, 'Doubts About Mandate for Bush, GOP,' Washington Post, May 2, 2005, p. A1.

² All poll data drawn from the National Election Pool consortium exit poll. See www.elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/presidential/exit-poll

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