

## US: What Next For The Republicans?

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Barack Obama's resounding victory over John McCain begs the question, what next for the US Republican party? Can they rebuild themselves in time to recapture the White House in 2012 (or Congress in the 2010 mid-term elections)? What will they have to do? Who will spearhead them next time round?

A key problem for the Republicans is that the party incorporates somewhat divergent interests. These include:

- Social conservatives
- Evangelical Christians
- Business elites (those supporting low taxes, small government, and free trade)
- Small government libertarians
- National defence hawks
- Rural dwellers (predominantly white)
- Urban blue collar white Anglo-Saxons

Admittedly, the above categories are not as mutually exclusive as they sound. Many voters would count themselves in several of these categories. However, it seems to me that there are considerable differences in outlook between, for example, globally-minded pro-business free-traders and predominantly rural social conservatives who have never left the United States. Similarly, Republican business elites are generally keen to court China, whereas defence hawks are more likely to view China as a threat. Within the defence hawks, there are 'realists' who favour minimal foreign engagements, and 'internationalists' and some 'neo-cons' (remember them?) who favour a globally activist US. Another difference: business leaders tend to favour continued immigration for the purposes of replenishing the labour force, whereas cultural conservatives are likely to be worried about the loss of 'Anglo-Saxon' values (see Samuel Huntington's book, *Who Are We?*).

I acknowledge, of course, that such schisms exist in many political parties the world over, but in the case of John McCain's campaign, it seems to me that he was unable to bridge this divide. For example, his choice of Sarah Palin as running mate energised his base, but cast doubt on his attempts to portray himself as a moderate.

In choosing its presidential candidate in 2012, the Republicans will have to be extraordinary careful. Palin is an obvious contender in 2012, but her selection would suggest that the Republicans are deepening rather than broadening their appeal. Her ultra-conservative views could turn off moderate Republicans. She would be too polarising on a national basis.

Other candidates include former governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, governor Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, and governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. The latter, an Indian-American, could conceivably be the Republicans' answer to Barack Obama, but he may put off cultural conservatives who want an 'All American' president.

An extremely wild card could be California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose second and final term expires in January 2011. He is a moderate Republican ruling a liberal state. However, his Austrian birth precludes him from the presidency, and it is unclear if the constitution will ever be changed in this regard. In addition, if California's economy comes a cropper in the recession, he might have to take the blame.

(An even wilder card would be for Canada's recently re-elected conservative prime minister, Stephen Harper, to push for a merger between the US and Canada, thus enabling him to become the first Supreme Consul of the North American Federation.)

Beyond personalities, there are structural reasons why the Republicans can make a comeback before too long. One reason is that the US remains a conservative country. Indeed, in the wake of George W. Bush's victory over John Kerry in 2004, one controversial columnist in Asia Times argued that demography favours the Republicans. Conservatives tend to have more children than liberals, thus allowing them to outbreed liberals. This argument is too simplistic for my liking; there is no guarantee that the children of conservatives will automatically be conservative, and in any case, there are often more pressing issues than social values that come up in elections, such as the economy and foreign policy.

A second reason is immigration. The US is becoming increasingly Hispanicised. Although Hispanics have tended to favour the Democrats, there are grounds to believe that as they become more affluent, their generally conservative social values could steer them towards the Republicans.

Most likely, though, neither the Republicans nor Democrats will have a monopoly on the presidency over the coming generation.