



A Suicidal Republican Civil War

Christopher S. Parker, University of Washington-Seattle Campus

The Republican Party is at war with itself – and has been since 2010 when several self-styled "insurgents" identified with the Tea Party challenged established Republicans in the primaries. Not all challengers win, but to date upsets by Tea Party challengers have cost the GOP at least seven seats in general elections for the U.S. Senate. This is a source of continuing friction between the officially entrenched and Tea Party factions of the Republican Party, and key policy disputes between the two camps further fuel discord. Policy cracks in the Republican Congressional conferences emerged during the debt ceiling disputes of 2011, when top House and Senate GOP leaders sought compromise with Democrats but Tea Party types refused to go along. Similar disagreements have emerged over a series of issues including immigration reform, renewal of federal highway funding, tactics for opposing the Affordable Care Act, and now the issue of the renewal of the federal Export-Import Bank.

In fact, the rift is now so wide that Senator John S. McCain of Arizona, a pillar of the GOP establishment, has taken to calling Tea Partiers "wacko birds." Continuing unresolved fratricide could threaten the survival of the Republican Party.

Clashes within the GOP aren't new, of course. The recent friction between the GOP establishment and Tea Party forces is similar to clashes that rocked the Republican Party in the 1960s – yet with a crucial difference. Instead of bowing to the more right-wing elements of the party, as today's Republicans have, the administration of Republican President Dwight David Eisenhower took a moderate tack best explained by Eisenhower's Under Secretary of Labor, Arthur Larson. He described what he called "true conservatism" as a belief system focused on the preservation and promotion of American ideals and values, even if government had to take active steps to secure such preservation. Larson contrasted such genuine conservatism to a "false conservatism." For him, this belief system was willing to reject new and innovative ways to preserve the American way and insist on older ways, even if stubborn adherence to them would ultimately undermine values Americans cherish.

Such sentiments are alien to many members of today's Republican Party. In fact, the GOP has now shifted so far to the right that former Republican Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas recently observed that neither he nor the late President Ronald Reagan would be able to make it in today's party.

The contemporary shift to the far-right, most observers would agree, was launched back in the 1960s under the leadership of Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who directly rejected Larson's "true conservatism," where government has a positive role to play by undertaking tasks too large for individuals on their own. Goldwater was aghast at what he viewed as Larson's "unqualified repudiation of the principle of limited government" and he believed an activist state would ultimately result in "totalitarianism." Goldwater counseled a steadfast belief in established ways of doing things, "not because they are old, but because they

are true."

Reasonable people can disagree on whether fractures in the GOP today resonate with the disputes of the 1960s. Nevertheless, resistance to social change, and the refusal of the insurgent wing of the GOP to adapt to changing times, is implicated in the fundamentalist views of both periods. For instance, in the 1960s, Goldwater's campaign was fueled by steadfast refusals to yield to civil rights movements sweeping the country; tellingly, in the 1964 presidential contest, Goldwater carried five states in addition to his own – Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, all of them in the heart of the Black Belt in the Deep South. In the current Tea Party movement, reactionary elements of the GOP also resist the speed with which America is changing socially and culturally. With a black man in the White House, with new immigrants gaining ground in American society, and changes such as gay rights gaining currency, Tea Party supporters are pushing back by opposing and blocking legislative efforts favored by Democrats.

Parallels between the GOP of the early 1960s and the present moment end here, however; and this is why. Even though the Goldwater-led GOP registered victories in only six states in 1964, that presidential campaign laid the groundwork for a burgeoning grassroots conservative movement in the years that followed. Before long, Republicans adopted a different strategy, including appeals to working-class, ethnic whites in the "North" along with white southerners. With that approach, Richard M. Nixon won the White House twice, and conservatism all but dominated the American political landscape for the better part of 30 years. But with the rapidly changing demographics in America, the reactionary wing of the current Republican Party won't come close to replicating the success of its predecessor.

Like the GOP in the past, the current Republican Party needs to pursue a new constituency – if it wishes to survive and gain ground in national politics. But this time the constituency it needs to win over to ensure its survival is not the older whites that the Tea Party regards as "real Americans." Instead, to be viable over the long run, the party must win support from many in the growing ranks of Latino citizens and voters. Yet recent public opinion suggests that Latinos reject House Republicans' harsh, purely "law and order" approach to immigration. Only 13 percent of Latinos agree with the priority House Republicans place on securing the border prior to any legalization for millions of newcomers already living and working across the United States. Likewise, less than a quarter of Latinos agree with the proposition so popular among Republicans, especially Tea Partiers, that more and more undocumented immigrants should be hunted down and sent to jail or detention centers.

Policy differences within the Republican Party today matter as much as win and loss tallies in primary and general elections. If Congressional Republicans continue to let the Tea Party's nativist preferences control the legislative agenda on immigration reform, they will lose an opportunity to help deliver comprehensive immigration reforms that most Americans, including most non-Tea Party Republicans and GOP-aligned business interests, consider vital for America and the future viability of the Republican Party at the national level. Remaining hostage to Tea Party forces resisting social change in America could cost Republicans the White House again in 2016, and set the stage for future significant losses in Congress. In short, if the Tea Party really retains its leverage – if it truly wins the party's heart and soul for keeps – then the Republican Party will ultimately lose, big time