

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

AND THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

by Marc Gafarot*

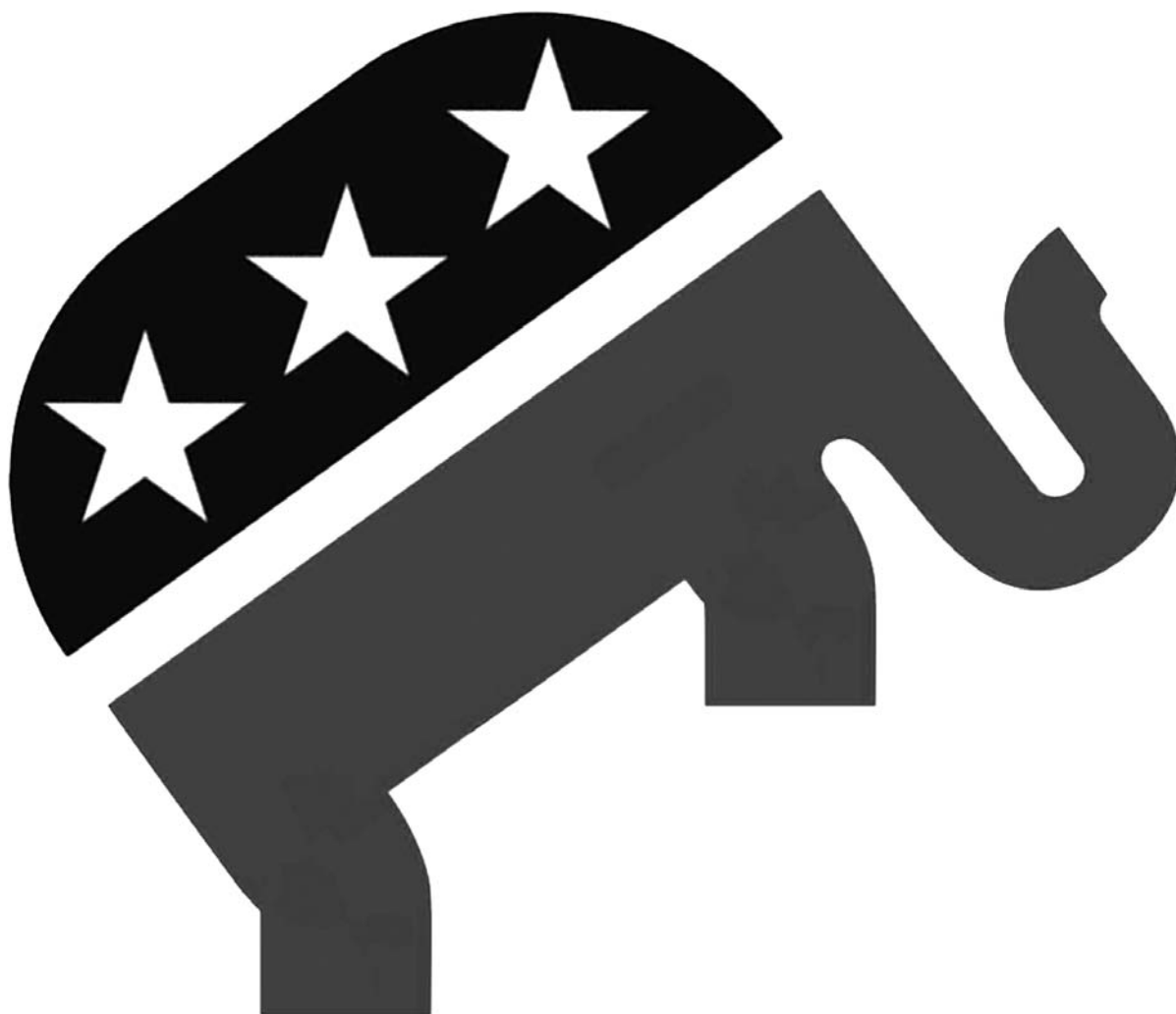
The Republican Party is one of the two major political parties in the United States. In modern times, it has been the most socially conservative and economically liberal party. The Republican Party was formed in 1854 as a coalition of Whigs, Northern Democrats and the Free Soil Party in order to oppose the spread of slavery and to promote the modernization of the United States. With the motto 'Free Land, Free Labor and Free Men' the party steadily grew from its foundation and retained its dominance until the 1930s. At that time the party enjoyed a broadly heterogeneous social base that included professionals, businessmen, white workers, particularly in the north, and blacks. It was seen as the party of 'big money' while also being the party that best represented the social rise of a country undergoing radical change, as the US clearly was in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. This all changed with the coming of the Great Depression and the implementation of Keynesian policies as part of FD Roosevelt's New Deal in an attempt to overcome the economic crisis. Since then the party's social and political foundations have changed and blacks, white workers and minorities in general have tended to place more trust in the Democrats. The Republicans did not return to power until the fifties with the Eisenhower - Nixon ticket. Since then the party has had five presidents: Nixon, Ford, Reagan, George Bush senior and George W. Bush.

[1] American political parties have central executives which are weak in nature and with much less power than their European counterparts, for example. Their main activities include the organization of fundraising events rather than setting the political or strategic agenda. Ideologically American parties are generally more diverse than European parties since their channels of communication are designed that way and moreover the constituency has a significant influence on its elected representative.

The Grand Old Party¹ (GOP), as the Republican Party is known, enjoys solid support among the well-off white middle classes and among the most powerful groups in the nation. Among the largest minorities, the blacks and Latinos, it has a low level of support. This is not the case for minorities who have fled communist countries, such as Cuba or Sino-Vietnam. The Republicans currently hold a majority in the House of Representatives and a minority in the Senate.

Uncertain elections: the 2012 presidentials

The 2012 elections will be a battle between the country's economy and its demography. As it stands, the economy poses a significant threat to President Obama's aspirations to be re-elected. He wouldn't be the first president to lose an election due to poor economic performance, as Bush senior can testify. Demographics, however, are radically changing the face of America and may prove to be the powerful trump card which allows



Obama to remain in the White House for four more years. In Washington, everyone is aware of Obama's growing weakness and the fact that his policies are 'hostages' to Republican dictates. In a little over two and a half years in office, the president has frittered away most of the political credit and the special aura that won him the presidency.

In a recent survey six out of ten respondents saw President Obama as a poor economic manager. When such statistics are compounded by recent

financial arrangements that have been deemed unsatisfactory by the right and the left, the effects may prove fatal to the re-election prospects of the current incumbent of the White House. Some analysts believe he will get away with it in terms of the nomination but will pay the full price at the presidential elections. The growing debt crisis has been a clear political defeat for Obama. We will soon see if aside from being a political defeat it is also one for the economy for both America and the



world. Clearly the biggest problem for Obama is how to rebuild his image as a man of state who can take control of the American economy. Many of his unfulfilled promises to traditional Democratic voters have begun to weigh on him like millstones around his neck. Undoubtedly this reduces him politically far more than the mistrust and suspicion he initially aroused among Republicans. Obama is losing the political centre, and currently the strength of the Tea Party is one of the thorns in his side. This is clearly not a good sign.

This is why the Obama option inevitably depends on American demographics. Obama's electoral apparatus knows it and for some time now has been working to mobilize the black vote, which in principal should see few desertions, and the Latino vote in particular. No resources will be spared in undertaking this task. Results from the crucial swing states in the west such as Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado could well prove decisive. Between now and the elections the Re-

publicans will find it difficult to shake off the widespread perception among minorities (especially blacks and Hispanics) that they are the party that defends the rule of white America above all else. We must not forget that even McCain beat Obama for the white vote. Only a huge victory among this group would return the Republicans to the White House. Cohesion among the Republicans, which inevitably calls for a unifying leader, will be key, as is the degree of disaffection towards Barack Obama.

On taxes, economic policy and the philosophy of the new American right

The Republican recipe is very clear: the reduction of taxes and cuts in public spending. For many Republicans this is all that is needed to revive the economy once more. Nonetheless, things are never as simple as they sometimes appear, especially if we remember that the United States is among the countries with the lowest levels of taxation when

compared with other developed industrial economies. The theory that the United States suffers from economic stagnation because of the high level of taxation is therefore relegated to pure dogma.

The conservatives are overly reliant on abstract ideas which are often far removed from the American reality. Their insistence on becoming the unrepentant champions of social cutbacks could have a devastating effect on part of their own social base. Especially the more conservative elements who do not necessarily enjoy economic conditions which are typical of 'the party of big money'. Since its inception the American conservative political agenda has had a rigorous, intellectually stimulating political agenda with some very clear values: family, security and prosperity.

The rejection by some conservatives of reaching a compromise with the Democrats distances them from a centrist position, especially according to the image Obama's team seeks to project of him as a president who seeks agreement on matters affecting the national interest above party lines.

In the conservative American mind there is a clear link between debt and moral decay. This goes unnoticed in Europe but not in America. The welfare state supports permissive moral behaviour and irresponsible economic conduct. Deconstructing this system and strengthening more paternalistic charitable systems, would reinforce traditional sources of authority and order in which Judeo-Christian morality would prevail. It is a Puritan ideal that harks back to the original Founding Fathers of the United States. They were obsessed with debt, which they associated with the slave economy and dependence on others.

We should not forget something which is often ignored in other countries: American conservatives are there

to constrain the government's power and restore moral order. British Conservatives, on the other hand, are there to stay in power. While American conservatives defend radical ideas and policies, like revolutionaries bursting with religious values, the British Tories survive thanks to a chameleon-like ability to adapt their beliefs to a new orthodoxy that borders on orthopraxy.

THE 2012 ELECTIONS WILL BE A BATTLE BETWEEN THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMY AND ITS DEMOGRAPHY

The Republican Party's credentials and its major players

Nowadays many new conservatives embrace ideas which originate from abstract principles with little regard for the real life problems currently facing America and the American way of life. It is a peculiar return to a Jeffersonian past by calling into question Washington for being 'artificial and corrupt' and minimizing federal power, as far as possible. In the US, sooner or later the Jefferson vs. Hamilton debate (Alexander Hamilton, who defended a strong central government) rears its head once more, with politicians taking one side or the other. For many Republicans such a debate is seen as a tragedy because an excess of ideology is more of a burden than a virtue. However, many believe that the moderate conservative ideology also has an important role to play in modernizing the US. In the past this was the case but it remains to be seen if this will happen in the future.

Currently, Mitt Romney is the best-placed individual to be the Republican candidate in next year's elections. It should therefore come as no surprise that he is following a strategy of limiting and focusing his comments to Obama and not making many references to his Republican rivals. The

question is whether he can afford this luxury for much longer. Romney has been waiting for his opportunity for a long time but his candidacy is not without obstacles: he is a Mormon and he is perceived among his people as being overly in favour of making pacts with the Democrats. In this respect the health care reforms he carried out as Governor of Massachusetts are not very popular with the radicalized and surprisingly vocal grassroots of the party. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate him: he is still the best-known and most experienced candidate and his fund-raising abilities are unmatched within his party. At another time, as was the case with Reagan, Bob Dole and George Bush senior, he would unquestionably have been the candidate, thanks to his presence, political savvy and his links to economic power.

THE TEA PARTY'S AMATEURISM AND THEIR DESIRE TO TAKE A BACK SEAT MAKE THEM INTO A POINT OF MORAL REFERENCE FOR (ULTRA) CONSERVATIVE AMERICA

Supporters of the Tea Party, and all those who define the new Republican party, represent something new in politics that has a lot to do with pure, unbridled idealism. Their amateurism and desire to take a back seat make them into a point of moral reference for (ultra) conservative America while simultaneously, and accidentally, protecting the progressive values represented by Obama and a significant proportion of the Democratic Party. Ironically, Obama's greatest critics may turn out to hold the key to his re-election. Many Americans are disappointed with Obama, especially those on the Democratic side who had the highest hopes. Whatever happens, leaving the

country in the hands of the Tea Party is something that most American conservatives would view with great uncertainty and mistrust.

The Republican Party ought to keep in mind certain statistics: in 1980, when Reagan defeated Carter, 88% of voters were white. This figure fell to 74% in the 2008 presidential elections. Both Bush in 2000 and McCain in 2008 won the white vote with 55% of the vote. The new demography of the country was not so favourable, leading to a tie between Bush and Gore in a far from perfect election and McCain lost the overall vote by seven points. Worse still for the Republicans, the proportion of white voters is expected to continue to fall in the 2012 election. In the last elections McCain was unable to attract more than 31% of the Hispanic vote and a paltry 4% of the African-American vote.

And the names...

Who can unite them? Michele Bachmann, Congresswoman for Minnesota and a member of the Tea Party, and Herman Cain could receive some support from the establishment. Romney, Pawlenty, Huntsman and Bachmann herself could share the support of the ever-present Tea Party. However, so far at least, no candidate can achieve such a degree of cross party support as the Governor of Texas Rick Perry. Bush's former right-hand man in Texas could turn out to hold the magic wand, forging a coalition between the GOP and the Tea Party. He spoke about the Tea Party when no one else in his party paid them the least attention, preferring an insulting indifference. Such a union would enjoy the support of the business world and the party's grassroots. It should not be forgotten that he is a man with experience in government. This diversity makes him dangerous, and perhaps more importantly, highly versatile. His support base is so

wide that he can garner votes and support in many different sectors.

At present other Republican figures like Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, Rudolph Giuliani and Newt Gingrich, are shrewdly leaving the door open to their participation in the primaries but without explicitly making a public commitment, thereby spending more energy on self-promotion. Much has been said about Sarah Palin. Everyone knows her and this is both her greatest asset and her greatest obstacle. Palin has failed to seek strong alliances, and today, similarly to those mentioned above and others, she is more out of the presidential race than in it. It seems as if the battle is between Romney and Perry. This would see a return to the centrality of the Republican Party and

perhaps a reconciliation with sectors of the population that voted for Obama four years ago which are now likely to switch sides if the Republicans move towards the centre.

The Iowa caucuses, the first major electoral event of the nominating process for the post of President of the United States, are still too far off to make concrete predictions but pretenders to the highest political office in the United States are jostling for positioning and beginning to show their cards and political credentials. What until recently seemed impossible, the defeat of Obama, now appears quite the opposite. The political battle is on in the US, much is at stake and the rest of the world is waiting expectantly.

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