

The Demise of the Moderate Republican by Paul Starr

Though commentators often portray the Democrats and Republicans as mirror images of each other, American politics is not symmetrical. We do not have one party that represents the left in just the way that the other party represents the right. Among congressional Democrats, moderates and conservatives sharply circumscribed what Barack Obama

could do on the economy, health care, climate, and other issues even when his party had majorities in both the House and Senate.

The Republicans, in contrast, have virtually cleansed themselves of moderates and are poised to move the country sharply to the right if they win the 2012 election. The source of the party's shift is a mysterious death that may be the single most important contemporary political development—the demise of the moderate Republican in national politics.

Growing up in New York at a time when Dwight Eisenhower was president and Nelson Rockefeller was governor, I would never have guessed that moderate Republicans stood in mortal peril. For decades, they populated the upper echelons of American society, many of them from families with great wealth and long records of public service. These weren't the sort of people whose political prospects a liberal ever thought to worry about.

Even when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, the Republican Party still included significant numbers of moderates in Congress who limited how far right the party could move.

For example, Reagan at first wanted to turn the Medicaid program into a “block grant” to the states (eliminating the rights to health care provided to the poor under federal law), but thanks to an alliance of Democrats and moderate Republicans, Congress refused and during the 1980s, began expanding the program to cover more low-income children and pregnant women. Rather than trying to privatize Medicare and Social Security, Reagan ended up stabilizing both programs through measures that enjoyed bipartisan support.

By the 1994 election—the second Republican “revolution” of recent decades—the party had moved further to the right. Yet even in the mid-1990s, influential Republican moderates in Congress, particularly in the Senate (including, for example, John Chafee, Arlen Specter, Jim Jeffords, Nancy Kassebaum, and William Cohen), continued to serve as a brake on conservative policy and as partners with a Democratic administration. Without the support of those moderates, Congress would never have enacted the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997.

But with the 2010 election, American politics has entered a new phase. The

number of moderate Republicans in Congress has now been so reduced that the old restraints on the party are gone. As a result, in a divided government bipartisan cooperation is more difficult, and if Republicans take control of both Congress and the presidency in 2013, national policy will likely swing even more sharply to the right than it has after previous Republican victories.

The old, moderate restraining influences on the Republican Party have disappeared.

The budget introduced by Rep. Paul Ryan and approved by the Republican House is exhibit A. It was no surprise that Republicans wanted to repeal the Affordable Care Act without replacing it with any alternative means of covering the uninsured or that they wanted to turn Medicaid into a block grant on terms that would result in more low-income people losing coverage. But it was a bit of a surprise that, besides cutting the tax rates for the rich to levels not seen since 1931, they also voted to eliminate the traditional Medicare program and replace it with a voucher whose value is sure to fall short of provid-

ing the coverage that Medicare beneficiaries now have.

In 1995, the Republicans also sought to turn Medicare into a voucher program, but they didn't breathe a word about it until after they won the 1994 election. If Republicans in Congress are willing to vote for it now, they will surely be willing to carry it out if they win in 2012.

The alternation in power of the two major parties is an inevitable aspect of American politics. American elections hinge largely on the performance of the economy, and things don't look good now on that score. So, despite the unpopularity of their

policy views, the Republicans could win in 2012 and carry out the program long sought by right-wingers to reverse the hard-won social, labor, and environmental protections that the United States has established since the New Deal.

The threat to those programs comes from a change that began decades ago as a shift in the balance of influence within the GOP and has now reached the point where moderate restraint has been effectively extinguished. I was never much of a fan of moderate Republicans, yet these days, I find myself wishing more than anything else that they would rise from the dead. **TAP**