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What was the effect of shifting ideology in the Republican Party on their performance in the American Presidential Election of 2008?

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Abstract

The United States presidential election of 2008 is one of the most important recent events in history. In a new age of global economic troubles, growing democracies, and a dynamic American culture, the election of a new president in America is an important one to understand. The Republican Party, one of the two main political entities in the US, nominated Senator John Sidney McCain III as its presidential hopeful. Political ideologies that have grown in the late 20th and early 21st centuries help explain their selection as well as his performance in the election.

Fiscal conservatism, neoconservatism, and social conservatism were found to be three main ideologies of the Republican Party that shaped this election season. Unfortunately for the Republicans, fiscal conservatism took a lesser role as the economic recession beginning in 2007 forced some people to question at least temporarily the value of fiscal conservatism. Neoconservatism has dictated the foreign policy of the previous Republican presidential administration, as well as the record with which McCain voted as Senator used in his campaign. Albeit originally a popular sentiment to root out threats to democracy and America abroad, public opinion went sour for Republican handling of the situation, and not spared was McCain, one of the top supporters of the Bush administration's policies. Social conservatism has grown into an ideology based by a strong and large electoral base in evangelical and other religious communities, with whom McCain thought he needed to make amends.

In each area of economic and foreign policy and social issues, there was opportunity for McCain to lose votes that are crucial in an election. Combined with the opinions about the previous Republican administration, the public looked to the Democrats in 2008 for an alternative.

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Introduction

Free soil, Free labor, Free speech, Free men, Fremont. In 1856 John C. Fremont used this slogan in his, the first ever Republican presidential bid. It was a party platform based on free land in the West for new settlers, entrepreneurialism, and abolitionism.¹ Though these positions are not exactly the same as they were at the beginnings of both parties, currently the Republicans represent most of the conservative, right-of-center electorate, and the Democrats (the other main political entity in the United States) represent most of the liberal, left-of-center electorate. The terms “conservative” and “liberal” here, as well as all political ideological terms used in this essay, are used with caution, as political lexicon has changed greatly throughout history, and often some terms mean multiple things (for example, there are such groups as “conservative liberals” and “liberal conservatives”). This essay attempts to explore the political dialogue and machinery, particularly conservatism and what it means in the Republican Party as well as what it meant in the presidential election of 2008.

A political party in the United States is fueled by the ideological backgrounds of its members. Due to these backgrounds, politicians are elected to represent that party’s interests in a specified position of government. Perhaps the most popular political office in the American government is that of the president, head of the executive branch and head of state. In 2008, the Republicans chose Arizona Senator John Sidney McCain III as who they believed would represent them and America altogether in the White House. Because of his fiscally conservative economic stances, support of neoconservative foreign policy, and alliance with social conservatism, McCain was able to win the Republican presidential bid, however was not able to win the 2008 presidential election.

Arguably the most powerful and influential country in the world, the United States’ changing political tides are important to analyze and interpret. Movements within one of its major political

¹ Republican National Committee. (2009). The Republican Party - GOP History. Retrieved August 13, 2009, from gop.com: <http://www.gop.com/about/aboutread.aspx?guid=a747a888-0ae6-4441-94f4-2a3a6561f872>.

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entities, mainly those of neoconservatism, fiscal conservatism and social conservatism have ramifications beyond the party itself. Changing ideologies and support for these ideologies reflect not only how Americans will be affected, but how the other citizens of the world will be affected. Understanding what the mindset is of a large portion of the American electorate will reveal important points of what America will become, and where it will lead the world at the dawn of the 21st century.

Section I – GOP Ideology: New kids on the block

The term “conservative” is actually a conglomerate of numerous groups who subscribe to different political thoughts: neoconservatism emphasizes interventionism and nationalism, social conservatism puts a high premium on Christianity as a guiding force in all aspects of society, fiscal conservatism is concerned with the way the government handles its resources. Of course, any conservative (or any type of conservative) is hardly limited to the Republican party, but as the makeup of Americans goes, a Gallup poll from 2009 shows that 40±1% of Americans describe themselves as conservatives, 35±1% as moderates, and 21±1% as liberals.² Though the plurality of Americans are conservative, “What is a conservative?” is a question that few could probably concretely answer, however is a crucial question nonetheless, especially during a presidential election.

“Neoconservatism” is a relatively young manifestation of conservative thought, and important because of the roll it played in the Republican administration preceding as well as the actual election of 2008. Altogether the neocon persuasion believes in tax cuts for economic growth, sometimes necessary budget deficits, the defense of democracy wherever threatened in the world, and that American culture is quickly eroding from its past principles.³

² Saad, L. (2009, June 15). “Conservatives” Are Single-Largest Ideological Group. Retrieved August 21, 2009 , from Gallup: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/120857/Conservatives-Single-Largest-Ideological-Group.aspx>

³ Kristol, I. (2003, August 25). *The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is*. Retrieved August 9, 2009, from The Weekly Standard: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/000tzmlw.asp>

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Another recent group of conservatives who have come to prominence in the three decades preceding the 2008 were the social conservatives. Their notable presences in American politics are during the “Reagan-Revolution” in 1981, the “Republican Revolution” in 1994, and the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000. Geographically they are associated (but hardly limited to) the so called “Bible belt” of states, states like South Carolina and Georgia all the way through Arkansas and Texas, and north all the way up as Tennessee and Kentucky. Social conservatives, especially recognizable in this Bible belt place a very high value on evangelical Christianity, usually Baptist Christianity, and its application to society and culture. Their most passionate stances are those such as pro-life/anti-abortion, pro-family/anti-gay-marriage, anti-embryonic stem-cell research, pro-Second Amendment, anti-illegal immigration, anti-trade union, and lifting the ban on school prayer. Some of their positions even expand outside the realm of social issues and move into economic and foreign policy, such as anti-welfare/pro-equal opportunity, high tariffs on countries that do not uphold human rights, and the maintenance of a strong national defense.⁴

Some examples of the neoconservative and social conservative influence in the Bush administration will later be analyzed, and additionally, what affect that influence had in the 2008 election. The performance of Senator McCain is in large part due to the imprint that these groups of conservatives had on the Republican Party during their control of the Bush presidency.

Section II - It's the Economy, Stupid

The economic stage leading into the 2008 Presidential Election season was very grim. The National Bureau of Economic Research reported in December, 2008 that the American economy reached a peak of activity in December 2007, close to the beginning of the true election season.⁵ So for a

⁴ Quinn, J. (n.d.). *Are You a Social Conservative?* Retrieved November 15, 2009, from About.com: US Conservative Politics: <http://usconservatives.about.com/od/typesofconservatives/a/SocialCons.htm>

⁵ National Bureau of Economic Research. (2008, December 11). Determination of the December 2007 Peak in Economic Activity. Retrieved August 19, 2009, from <http://www.nber.org/cycles/dec2008.pdf>

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year, the Bureau explained, the country had technically been in a recession, and was unsure of when the trough would be hit. In a final weekend poll before the election taken in November, 2008, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 64% of Americans rated the economic conditions in the country as “poor.”⁶ Much scrutiny would be put on both Democrat and Republican candidates on how exactly they would encourage economic growth in the buckling economy and manage precious taxpayer money.

A commonly held position by neocons and other conservatives to stimulate economic growth is tax cuts. The general idea is that if taxpayers keep more of their money, they can spend more of it independently rather than the government spending it for them. Additionally neocons are interested in the “intellectual history” that tax cuts fall in line with. Because democracy is perpetuated best by the elimination of class warfare, economic prosperity for all citizens is best at breaking down social class barriers. Tax cuts help to achieve democratic “legitimacy and durability.”⁷

Despite common conservative agreement that tax cuts were the way to go, Senator McCain, living up to his “maverick” status has had an interesting relationship with said policy. When President Bush put into place his first round of tax cuts in 2001, McCain was one of the two Republican senators to oppose it. In 2003, he stayed consistent, calling the second round of tax cuts irresponsible. However, in 2006, with a Republican push to make the tax cuts permanent, he voted to extend the cuts for dividends and capital gains, saying, “American businesses and investors need a stable and predictable tax policy.”⁸ This suggests that McCain may have changed his position because the tax cuts had been in place for so long already that changing them again would not help businesses. Whatever the reason, if not the

⁶ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2008, November 1). *November 2008 Election Weekend Survey*. Retrieved August 20, 2009, from people-press.org: <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/468.pdf>

⁷ Kristol, I. *The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is*.

⁸ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.39.

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adoption by mainline conservatism of the neoconservative idea of tax cuts, their position was only strengthened by the justification put in place by the neocons.

One of the more unpopular neocon stances is their lax attitude towards budget deficits. They see it as the nature of a democracy to be reckless and inefficient economically, so they accept, at least temporarily, a deficit in the hope of economic growth. Herein lays the neoconservative support for the fundamentals of FDR's New Deal, which enacted a series of large government expenditures to help bring the country out of the Great Depression of the 1930s. This is clearly seen in the Bush administration's large deficits accumulated throughout its presidency, which totaled \$482 billion predicted for the 2009 fiscal year. Jim Nussle, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget of the Bush administration said that since a big part of the deficit was due to a \$170 billion bipartisan stimulus package (73% of Americans approved it⁹), "The determination was made that getting the economy back on track was a higher priority than immediate deficit reduction."¹⁰ Completely opposite to this, Senator McCain said to Politico during his campaign that he would promise to "balance the federal budget by the end of his first term by curbing wasteful spending and overhauling entitlement programs, including Social Security."¹¹ This chord resounded well with many Republicans, as according to a Rasmussen national telephone survey in November, 2007, 67±2% of Republicans considers themselves fiscal conservatives.¹² This discrepancy between the Republican Party and the policies of the Republican president thus show McCain's success as a candidate due to his promise to balance the budget, falling in step with mainline fiscal conservatives.

⁹ Saad, L. (2008, February 6). *Americans Give Bipartisan Support to Stimulus Package*. Retrieved November 15, 2009, from Gallup.com: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/104173/Americans-Give-Bipartisan-Support-Stimulus-Package.aspx>

¹⁰ Keiler, B., & Anderson, S. (2008, July 28). *White House projects record deficit for 2009*. Retrieved August 19, 2009, from CNNPolitics.com: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/28/2009.deficit/index.html>

¹¹ Allen, M. (2008, July 6). *McCain promises to balance budget*. Retrieved August 19, 2009, from Politico: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0708/11553.html>

¹² Rasmussen Reports. (2007, November 24). *24% Are Both Fiscal and Socially Conservatives, 9% Fiscally and Socially Liberal*. Retrieved August 20, 2009, from Rasmussen Reports: http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/november_2007/24_are_both_fiscal_and_socially_conservatives_9_fiscally_and_socially_liberal

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Especially with the deteriorating condition of the economy (which usually means the incumbent presidential party will not be reelected), McCain needed to show his dedication to making the government accountable when it came to its finances. Combined with a balanced budget and the public image that the government would be further restricted with tax cuts, the McCain campaign extended a hand to those small/limited government conservatives who had become disillusioned with the Bush administration. Despite this, it may have come at the wrong time, considering 77% of Republicans were in support of spending \$152 billion for the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008.¹³ This discrepancy between McCain and the Republican voters may have led to their hesitation to accepting him as a leader that could solve America's economic problems.

Section III - To War, or Not to War?

One of the most recent and controversial decisions for the United States to intervene over seas was in 2003 when the US invaded Iraq due to Saddam Hussein's continued noncompliance with the United Nations Security Council weapons inspections after the Persian Gulf War. Senator McCain, at the 2004 Republican National Convention, strongly reiterated the decision to go to Iraq, adamantly proclaiming, "[The war was] necessary, achievable, and noble... [The choice] wasn't between a benign status quo and the bloodshed of war. It was between war and a graver threat. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."¹⁴

The United States saw in a referendum the approval of an Iraqi constitution in October, 2005, and two months later elected a 275-member Council of Representatives. In the ensuing months and years, the young Iraqi democracy approved most cabinet members, and in 2009 elected provincial councils in provinces around the country.¹⁵ Over the years, however, including a blistering report on

¹³ Saad, L. *Americans Give Bipartisan Support to Stimulus Package*.

¹⁴ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.39.

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. (2009, April 11). *Iraq*. Retrieved August 21, 2009 , from CIA - The World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

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progress by the Iraq Study Group, public opinion has turned away from the noble cause Senator McCain once iterated. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that in early January, 2007, 53% of Americans thought that the decision to use military force against Iraq was the wrong decision, compared to 40% who believed it was the right decision. This is a dramatic change from the initial weeks of the Iraq invasion in March, 2003, when only 22% believed it to be the wrong decision while 71% of the public thought it the right decision.¹⁶

The source of this steadfastness by the Bush administration and McCain's support can be explained by neoconservatism. The neocons took over the mantle of interventionism and American influence overseas, especially after the original grassroots conservatism of the 1930s which worked under the premise of nationalism, non-interventionism, and anti-New Deal faded away after the attack on Pearl Harbor.¹⁷ Again, looking at the explanation given by the godfather of neoconservatism:

*"...for a great power, the 'national interest' is not a geographical term...A larger nation has more extensive interests...Barring extraordinary events, the United States will always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from nondemocratic forces, external or internal. That is why we feel it necessary to defend Israel today, when its survival is threatened. No complicated geopolitical calculations of national interest are necessary."*¹⁸

Here Kristol defends interventionist American policy as a sort of backwards containment (used during the Cold War), closer to a rollback policy. The American military is used to prevent the destruction of democracies wherever threatened, to "rollback" any invasion of a democracy. It is

¹⁶ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2008, November 1). *November 2008 Election Weekend Survey*.

¹⁷ North, G. *An Introduction to Neoconservatism*.

¹⁸ Kristol, I. *The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is*.

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important to see the perspective, in that Irving Kristol is writing as a prominent neoconservative. He believes in the persuasion, thus would describe it in such a glowing fashion.

Leading libertarian conservative Senator Barry Goldwater seems to agree with the neocon ideal of American involvement overseas. Rather than claim that it is America's duty to defend democracy, as Kristol believes, Goldwater believes in the more noble idea of American global leadership. In a speech made in his Senate reelection campaign in 1968, Goldwater said this about Vietnam and the Pacific foreign policy:

"...I do feel that the future of the United States – indeed of the whole world – is dependent upon developments in the vast, mysterious area of the Pacific...Do we in this country wish to relinquish the mantle of world leadership which became ours at the conclusion of World War II?...we have responsibilities...all of us would like to be loved, but...we would rather be respected; not for warlike characteristics, but for a desire for peace...for a desire to keep our promises...isolationism...would provide an illusory feeling of safety."¹⁹

Despite the public opinion at the time, President Bush, on January 10, 2007 announced on national television that there were too few troops on the ground in Baghdad, and would ask for 20,000 more troops to be deployed to Iraq to help stabilize the situation, warning of additional US casualties in the months ahead. He defended the point, however, saying, "to step back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government." Even then, a Washington Post/ABC News overnight poll found that 61% of Americans opposed the troop surge, most of them strongly opposed. Among the Democrat controlled Congress trying to block the action, as well as some opposition from military commanders, Senator McCain was one of the lone allies of the president, and in what became a viral campaign sound byte said

¹⁹ Dean, J. W., & Goldwater Jr., B. M. *Pure Goldwater*. p. 332.

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to CNN's Larry King that with regards to his allegiance's affect on his run for president, "I would much rather lose a campaign than lose a war."²⁰

The Senator showed finally most clearly in one of the most important issues of the campaign, his alignment with the conservative base of the Republican Party. Staunch right wing Republicans would see McCain's steadfastness as a sign that, despite his independent voting record, he was at heart one Republican that would not abandon both a commander-in-chief and a war that were obviously not the eye candy of public opinion. This act however, while furthering his case among the conservative base, may have at the same time turned off many of the independent and moderate supporters McCain had, a group he may have underestimated in value.

Section IV - The Counterculture

The success of neoconservatism in the Republican Party, however, can be most attributed to its "unexpected alliance" with evangelical, traditional conservatives.

*"The steady decline in our democratic culture, sinking to new levels of vulgarity, does unite neocons with traditional conservatives – though not with those libertarian conservatives who are conservative in economics but unmindful in culture. The upshot is a quite unexpected alliance between neocons, who include a fair portion of secular intellectuals, and religious traditionalists."*²¹

The definition of "evangelical" is very vague, but among most definitions, it constitutes a portion of Christians (who already make up roughly 80% of Americans) who take their religion very seriously and believe that the religious calls one to action in the environment in which one lives.²² Of course, these evangelicals are by no means limited to the GOP or even conservatism for that matter;

²⁰ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.242.

²¹ Kristol, I. *The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is*.

²² Newport, F., & Carroll, J. (2005, December 2). Another Look at Evangelicals in America Today. Retrieved August 19, 2009, from Gallup: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/20242/Another-Look-Evangelicals-America-Today.aspx>

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however those evangelicals present in the Republican Party have become the face of social policy on the right. Championing specific issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, teenage birth control, among others, those who make up the so-called “Christian Right” are staunchly pro-life and anti-same-sex marriage, as well as push abstinence only sex-education.

Irving Kristol explains social critics have believed that the bourgeois society, for a century and a half, lived off of “moral capital” which was fueled by religion and traditional philosophy, and that once this moral capital was depleted, bourgeois society would find its identity at a loss.

“I think it is becoming clear that religion, and a moral philosophy associated with religion, is far more important politically than the philosophy of liberal individualism admits...those who thought they were content with a religion that was a private affair are themselves discovering that such a religion is existentially unsatisfactory.”²³

Kristol is strong in his belief that morality is fundamentally based in religion, perhaps not on the evangelical level, but of religion nonetheless. It is important both for the society and for the maintenance of its culture that religion remains an important part of political morality. In this, the Social Right and neoconservatism found their strength. A Gallup survey in 2005 found that 40±2 % of Americans described themselves as either “born again” or “evangelical.”²⁴ Making up a huge portion of Americans, the evangelicals constituted a new Republican base that would be able to win elections. In the presidential election of 2000, President Bush won 68±3 % of the evangelical vote, and in 2004 he increased that percentage to 78±3 %.²⁵

The presence of the Christian Right is clearly evidenced by the primary season of 2008. Governor Huckabee was a relative no-name before the 2008 presidential election, whereas Governor Romney was

²³ Kristol, I. *Neoconservatism: An Autobiography of an Idea*. p. 101.

²⁴ Newport, F., & Carroll, J. (2005, December 2). *Another Look at Evangelicals in America Today*.

²⁵ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2004, December 6). *Religion and the Presidential Vote*. Retrieved August 19, 2009, from people-press.org: <http://people-press.org/commentary/?analysisid=103>

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the favorite to win the nomination by the end of 2007. Romney was famous for being elected as a Republican in one of the most liberal states in New England, as well as his accumulated wealth and success in the business sector. Both of these factors made him a prime candidate to be able to work with the Democrats and tackle the economy. The clincher however, is that Romney is a devout Mormon, a major issue for evangelicals, while Huckabee is a Baptist minister. In the last few months before January, when the first caucuses and primaries would take place, Huckabee pulled off a remarkable upset. Around 60% of the voters in the Republicans were evangelicals. Huckabee won 34% of the vote, with Romney trailing at second place with 25%.²⁶

Although the economy usually trumps most issues during an election season when economic conditions are bad, the religious conservatives in Iowa showed that they were more concerned with social issues, such as Romney's image of being a Mormon and his flip-flop on gay marriage. This is not to say that Romney was the outstandingly better candidate or that Huckabee was the less qualified one, but that the results of the caucus show that those voters from the religious wing of the Republicans had the most to say.

On the candidacy of Senator McCain, he was not the poster child of the Christian Right. In the 2000 presidential campaign, McCain also spoke out against evangelical preachers Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance,"²⁷ a statement that saw an end to his 2000 run. In his run in 2008, McCain appeared to make amends with Falwell: "I discussed with him my position on the gay marriage amendment...and they're not in agreement with me on the federalism aspect of it [McCain opposed a constitutional amendment but supported state bans on gay marriage.]"²⁸ Falwell then went on to ask McCain to deliver the commencement address at Liberty University. On the other hand, McCain took heat for abandoning the moderate voters who were not fans of the religious right. In response to a

²⁶ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.280.

²⁷ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.38.

²⁸ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.42.

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question at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire about the radical religious right, McCain said, “Should we eject people from our party because we may have disagreements? I think the great strength of the Republican Party is for us all to get involved, debate, and come to a consensus.”²⁹

Romney’s loss at Iowa, Huckabee’s initial success, as well as McCain’s resolution with the evangelicals showed that the religious Republicans were a force to be reckoned with, and the base of the party. It seems that the social conservatives in the Republican Party are so powerful that they will get what they want, and McCain realized that he could not alienate them. Unfortunately for McCain, his efforts went too short, as 6% less evangelicals voted for him in 2008 than did vote for George W. Bush in 2004.³⁰ The combination of the neoconservative insistence that American culture is threatened, strengthened by the social conservatives’ religious politics, has turned the focus in the Republican Party away from mainstream politics. While issues like national security, terrorism, and the economy are more pressing issues, the ideological battle of the social right has taken precedence.

Conclusion

On November 4, 2008, the results of the election showed Democratic nominee Barack Obama winning the popular vote, and the election, by almost ten thousand votes against Republican nominee John McCain. According to an American University report by Curtis Gans, Republican voter turnout dropped 1.3 percentage points from 2004 to 2008, while Democratic voters increased 2.8% from 2004.³¹ This combined with the decrease in evangelical support, the strong bipartisan support for government spending to counteract the recession, and increasing unpopularity of foreign wars that McCain supported were all that were needed to lose enough votes to lose the election.

²⁹ Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.42.

³⁰ *Voting Religiously*. (2008, November 10). Retrieved November 15, 2009, from PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1022/exit-poll-analysis-religion>

³¹ Gans, C. (2008). *Much-Hyped Turnout Record Fails to Materialize, Convenience Voting Fails to Boost Balloting*. Washington, D.C.: American University Media Relations .

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The Republicans were not able to meet the resounding success they had in the previous two presidential elections. No outstanding conservative candidate showed any promise of becoming a real contender for the Republican ticket. In the end, it showed when Republicans did not feel the necessity to vote, even if to maintain their party's position in the White House. John McCain, once a beacon of the center, tried to win in the way George W. Bush had the far right. McCain knew this when in 2005 he said, "...2000 and 2004...was able to energize the base enough so that you just expanded the base out and won...Every other time....it's the fight for the center."³² If McCain understood this, then why would he have tried to cater to the right? His strength was in the center, and though conservatives make up the plurality of Americans, the moderates together with the liberals make up more than the conservatives, which in the end saw a Democrat victory. The answer is that the Republican Party has moved to a state where the radical religious ideologues hold the majority, and politicians are afraid to move away from that powerhouse. There was hope for John McCain, "the maverick," but people became skeptical when he began championing himself as a conservative.

The once "Gallant Old Party" is now in the political wilderness. The ideological foundations which before had proved victorious are no longer working, but there is no clear path to a resounding new inspiration. Without a strong leader, to herald either the old or a new message, the Republicans won't find civilization for a while.

³² Balz, D., & Johnson, H. *The Battle for America 2008*. p.41.

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