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## Mitt Romney, the RNC, and How Barack Obama Became a Two-Term President

### **Introduction:**

On November 7th, 2012, Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney conceded the race to the incumbent president, Barack Obama. In his concession speech, he stated that, “Paul [Ryan] and I have left everything on the field. We have given our all to this campaign.”<sup>1</sup> Though he is evidently proud of the effort undergone by many of his supporters, there are clear shortcomings that caused him to lose the election. The Romney campaign and the Republican National Committee (RNC) were unable to elect him president due to poor fundraising efforts, an inability to grow his support base, and their inability to properly address the economy. Yet, despite these shortcomings, Romney’s attempt at obtaining the presidency has left an impact on how campaigns interact with and reach the public.

### **Barack Obama and the Incumbent Presidency:**

When approaching the Republican campaign in 2012, it is important to understand the challenges they faced against President Barack Obama. Foremost, President Obama’s popularity grew in the weeks leading up to the election, culminating in a 51% approval rating between the time frame of November 5th and 11th.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this positive rapport with the public, the Obama campaign held numerous advantageous connected to a sitting President. These included the ability to garner the attention of the national public and to shape the national agenda to align with their political views.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he was also immune from factors that have affected past

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<sup>1</sup> Mitt Romney, “Mitt Romney’s Concession Speech (Full Transcript)”, *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> “Presidential Approval Ratings -- Barack Obama”, *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116479/barack-obama-presidential-job-approval.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> John Sides et. al., *Campaigns and Elections* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2012), 238.

incumbent presidential campaigns. In 2012, President Obama faced no intra-party primary challengers nor any third party challengers who could steal Democratic votes, and he was not the President during a long period of Democratic control of the White House.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Barack Obama's popularity with the American voting electorate was not only enhanced by his Presidency, but the circumstances of his first term helped him to secure this place. This not only set the stage for his ultimate success in the 2012 election, but helps to highlight the faults of the Republicans' efforts to elect Mitt Romney.

### **Republican Fundraising:**

As one of the most nuanced aspects of the Republican National Committee's campaign efforts, the party's fundraising efforts reflect not a failure to reach out to supporters, but a failure to reach out to the *right* supporters. In their retrospective analysis of the 2012 election entitled the Growth and Opportunity Project, the RNC discussed their need to better utilize low-dollar fundraising, though they did not disclose the exact number they raised.<sup>5</sup> This juxtaposes the success that they found in major donor fundraising, in which they received a record-breaking \$140,523,792.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Romney was unable to keep up with Obama's success in low-dollar and major donor fundraising success, resulting in him being dependent on the money raised by the RNC in order to avoid drawing from his own bank account.<sup>7</sup> During an election where every dollar counted, the RNC's inability to obtain small-dollar donations proved detrimental for Romney, for it provided him with less money to allocate for advertising, outreach, and other campaign investments.

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<sup>4</sup> James W. Ceaser et. al., *After Hope and Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> "The Growth and Opportunity Project", Republican National Committee, 2013, 57.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> *After Hope and Change* pg 12-13 James W. Ceaser et. al., *After Hope and Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 97.

This shortcoming in fundraising became indicative of not only a disconnect with certain socio-economic demographics, but a general disorganization of the RNC. In the Growth and Opportunity Report, the writers conceded that the Democratic Party has both an organized and effective fundraising approach, due in part to programs such as NGP VAN and an effective use of targeted emailing.<sup>8</sup> The RNC has not only recognized that they need to perform similar measures, but that they must invest in human capital via training at the state level.<sup>9</sup> In essence, the RNC's flaws in fundraising are not derived from a perceived lack of donors, but rather an acknowledged inability to attract low-dollar donations. As a result, they limited themselves in two primary ways. First, they could not return to these major donors like they could low-dollar donors, since these people had most likely maxed out their giving potential. Additionally, they had limited the overall amount of money they can take in, for even low-dollar donations are donations nonetheless. In turn, the RNC's fundraising approach limited the pool of people and money that they could rely on during the campaign.

### **The Republican Base:**

In a manner similar to their fundraising, the RNC and the Romney campaign were unable to expand their base so as to effectively gain support and votes. Foremost, during the course of the campaign, the RNC has acknowledged that they lacked the support from demographics such as African-Americans, Hispanics, women, and youth.<sup>10</sup> This was due in part to the inability of the party to change negative perceptions of Mitt Romney. These demographics (which ended up voting primarily Democratic<sup>11</sup>) did not believe that Romney was inept to be president, but rather

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<sup>8</sup> "The Growth and Opportunity Project", 2013, 56, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>11</sup> "How Groups Voted in 2012", Roper Center, Cornell University, 2013, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-2012>.

saw him as apathetic.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Obama campaign was also able to capitalize on this perception by arguing that Romney's status as the wealthiest major party nominee in history was in fact indicative of his favoritism of the "top 1%" over the common man.<sup>13</sup> By not removing the perceived correlation between Mitt Romney's wealth and character, the Republican Party left themselves vulnerable to the Democratic party's exploitation. Consequently, the Democratic party was able to secure their diverse base and effectively paint Mitt Romney as lacking in the moral qualifications as president.

Furthermore, the RNC was unable to make Mitt Romney fully palpable to his own party. Following the financial crisis of 2008, many conservatives became frustrated with the Republican Party's perceived compromise of values. Programs such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program and Bush's vocal decision to "abandoned free-market principles to save the free market system" helped to create the highly conservative Tea Party Movement.<sup>14</sup> Indicative of a growing resurgence in conservatism at the time, this frustration with mainstream Republicanism became reflected in criticisms towards Mitt Romney. When attempting to appeal to these conservatives and moderate votes, he was labeled a "flip flopper" for a perceived inconsistency in policy positions.<sup>15</sup> One of the core tenets of this argument arose from the healthcare system he implemented during his time as governor of Massachusetts, which many argued bore uncanny similarities to President Obama's Affordable Care Act.<sup>16</sup> This resulted in a less galvanized base

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<sup>12</sup> After Hope and Change pg 12-13 James W. Ceaser et. al., *After Hope and Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 98.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew E. Busch, "Political Movements, Presidential Nominations, and the Tea Party" in *The Making of the Presidential Candidates: 2012*, ed. William G. Mayer and Jonathan Bernstein (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2012), 69-70.

<sup>15</sup> John Sides et. al., *Campaigns and Elections* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2012), 136.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Balz, *Collision 2012* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 96.

and a lack of passion by the Republican Party. For even though these individuals may have still voted for Mitt Romney, they might have voiced their support in a less enthusiastic manner. As a result, they may not have donated to his campaign or advertised his candidacy on a level on par with their capabilities. In trying to gain as much support as possible, the Romney Campaign and the RNC ultimately sidelined a vocal sect of the Republican Party.

### **The Republicans' Approach to the Economy:**

Lasty, the Romney campaign and the RNC struggled to resonate with voters by leaning too heavily into a laissez-faire approach to economics.

Following the Great Recession of the late 2000s, economic growth in 2012 began to stall as it had during the third quarter of 2009.<sup>17</sup> Being that the economy is one of the most powerful factors in Presidential elections<sup>18</sup>, the Republican Party began to argue that President Obama had failed the American people and Mitt Romney would have a better grasp of the economy.<sup>19</sup> Citing statistics such as the rise in both the unemployment rate and gas prices, Mitt Romney made the economy one of the main focal points of his campaign<sup>20</sup> and argued that his successful career in the private sector made him best suited to tackle these issues.<sup>21</sup> Yet, by refusing to release most of his tax returns and by criticising those dependent on the government as “victims”, Romney allowed himself to be portrayed as a callous and apathetic businessman by Democrats and the Obama campaign.<sup>22</sup> The Republican National Committee also reflected the free-market ideology

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<sup>17</sup> “Recent U.S. Economic Growth”, The Department of the Treasury, May, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> John Sides et. al., *Campaigns and Elections* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2012), 239.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Balz, *Collision 2012* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 98-99

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, 98-99.

<sup>21</sup> Graham G. Dodds, “The Culture Wars of the 2012 Presidential Election,” in *Culture, Rhetoric, and Voting*, ed. Douglas M. Brattebo et. al. (Akron: The University of Akron Press, 2016), 79.

<sup>22</sup> Graham G. Dodds, “The Culture Wars of the 2012 Presidential Election,” in *Culture, Rhetoric, and Voting*, ed. Douglas M. Brattebo et. al. (Akron: The University of Akron Press, 2016), 79.

embodied by Mitt Romney in their official 2012 platform, in which they stated that “[their] vision of an opportunity society stands in stark contrast to the current administration’s policies that expand entitlements and guarantees, create new public programs, and provide expensive government bailouts.”<sup>23</sup> By aligning themselves with the free-market and laissez-faire principles purported by Mitt Romney, the RNC in turn made themselves susceptible to the vulnerabilities of these economic philosophies. Though a unified front between the campaign and party leadership is not inherently ineffective (and at many times very important), the Republican Party’s efforts in the 2012 election reflect a strong reliance on their principles without appropriately addressing the criticisms made by the Obama campaign.

By approaching the economy in this manner, the Republican front fell victim to retrospective voting. Whereas incumbent presidents have a greater likelihood of winning reelection if the economy is growing<sup>24</sup>, the Obama administration benefited from the ultimate growth in the economy during his first term. During the fourth quarter in 2008, real GDP had fallen 8.9% but had sustained growth after the third quarter of 2009.<sup>25</sup> In turn, this helped to solidify the faith that the American people had for President Obama and help to secure support for the election. By having a unified platform that rejected many of the Obama Administration’s economic programs (e.g. the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and renewing loans to major auto companies), the Republican National Committee failed to deter enough individuals from voting for him. If they had worked with the Romney campaign to create an economic platform that did not reject much of the economic growth under the Obama administration, then more moderate voters may have been inclined to cross party lines.

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<sup>23</sup> “2012 Republican Party Platform”, Republican National Committee, August 28, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> John Sides et. al., *Campaigns and Elections* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2012), 239.

<sup>25</sup> “Recent U.S. Economic Growth”, The Department of the Treasury, May, 2012.

**Conclusion:**

When approaching the 2012 election, it must not be forgotten that many factors were at work, as evidenced by the plethora of academic literature on the matter. Yet, there are clear connections between the efforts of the Republican National Committee and of the Romney Campaign and their inability to obtain the White House. By limiting their fundraising efforts, failing to expand their base, and pursuing an unattractive economic agenda, the Republican Party was unable to reclaim the executive branch from the Democratic Party. Hence, the Republican Party can be used as a case study in the dangers of shoehorning and limiting one's campaign. If they were able to expand beyond their typical supporters and appeal to more diverse demographics, then they may have had a better chance of making Barack Obama a one-term president.

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