

Can the Republican Party Survive?



Every four years we get the same alert: “This is the most important presidential election in our lifetime.” The message is clear, if not spoken in so many words: Get out and vote because if you don’t and the wrong candidate wins ... *America is doomed!* Of course, it never quite works out that way. Somehow we manage to survive. And then, four years later, we get the same dire warning.

But this time the boy may not be crying wolf. This time, at least for Republicans, it may very well be the most important election of a lifetime – and not because of the fear that if Hillary wins the country will go down the drain. This time the very existence of the party may be at stake.

The two leading candidates on the Republican side – Donald Trump and Ted Cruz – are also the most polarizing candidates in the field. Their supporters love them and their detractors detest them. They may be the most popular on the GOP side at the moment – but they may also be the least popular in a general election.

In a New York Times story, under the headline, “For Republicans, Mounting Fears of Lasting Split”, Senator Lindsey Graham says, in essence, that judgment day for his party is coming.

“If Trump or Cruz wins the White House, then my side of the party has to re-evaluate who we are, what we stand for, and I’d be willing to do that,” he told the Times. “But if Trump or Cruz loses the presidency, would their supporters re-

evaluate their views on immigration and other issues that would grow the party? If they do that, we can come back together. If they don't, the party probably splits in a permanent way."

That's not an exaggeration. Cruz supporters have very little in common with those who like John Kasich or Chris Christie, for example. Trump supporters don't have much use for Jeb Bush or Carly Fiorina. Will the moderates really "re-evaluate" what their party stands for if their wing loses. Maybe. But it's hard to imagine the hard right doing much re-evaluating – a process many in that wing see as selling out their principles.

As the Times points out, "While party leaders like Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina say Republicans are in a 'demographic death spiral' and will not survive unless they start appealing to Hispanics and young people, many voters see such statements as a capitulation. They hunger for an unapologetic brand of conservatism that would confront rather than acquiesce to the political establishment – sentiments that have been amplified by conservative talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and commentators like Ann Coulter, whose verbal broadsides influence the party's agenda."

The split is real. It's not just that the hard right disagrees with moderates; the hard right detests the moderates, whom they see as wimpy RINOs. And the feelings are mutual going the other way. The moderates see the hard right as crazies who think compromise is a felony. So, do the two wings of the Republican Party have enough in common to actually come together and back the party's candidate, whoever it turns out to be?

It's plausible that if Trump doesn't get the nomination, many of his followers, disillusioned as they might be, would jump onto the Cruz bandwagon. And the same is true if Cruz doesn't get the nomination; many of his supporters would support Trump.

But what if the frontrunners don't make it to the finish line? It's hard to imagine Trump and Cruz supporters backing an "establishment" candidate. Marco Rubio might be a someone both sides can support. But that's not a sure thing – or anything close to a sure thing.

America may not flourish if Hillary Clinton wins. The last thing we need next time around is Barack Obama in a dress. But America will survive. It always does. As for the Republican Party ... I'm not at all sure about that.