

Why moderate Republicans should both fear and look forward to the 2020 election.

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For moderate Republicans, this year's election has been a disaster. The GOP nominee, Donald Trump, has been promoting xenophobic, racist policies, and his nearest rival, Senator Ted Cruz, is an arch-conservative. With 2016 written off, do moderate Republicans have any reasons to be cheerful about the 2020 election? [Rory Kinane](#) gives five reasons why they might be, and five more reasons why 2020 could be another bad year for the moderate wing of the GOP.



More than four months out till election day, many moderate Republicans have already written off the 2016 presidential election. Even before Donald Trump looked near certain to win, they felt that the most likely alternative – Texas Senator Ted Cruz – would be just as disastrous. The only way a moderate could clinch the nomination, they reasoned, would have been through a pyrrhic victory at a contested convention.

With a difficult election looming and Trump managing to find [new ways to offend key demographics](#), Republicans have already started looking at the 2020 race. There are some clear reasons to be optimistic, but also some huge obstacles for the party to overcome:

Five reasons 2020 could be the GOPs year

- **All politics is local.** The party may be performing badly in national elections, but it has actually been performing very well in Congressional and State level elections. For example, there are 31 Republican Governors. The presidency may be out of reach, but the party machinery is in good shape.
- **History is on their side.** No party has won more than three consecutive presidential terms since FDR and Truman. Since then a rough pattern has emerged – a party is often seen as in crisis due to a bad presidential election result, but recovers soon after. The disastrous campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964 (cited by many as comparable to Donald Trump in terms of electability) was followed by Richard Nixon's ascendancy in 1968. The Democrats struggled in presidential elections in 1984 and 1988, but were resurgent in 1992.
- **Hillary Clinton is not popular.** Clinton is very unpopular by historical standards. There has been little focus on this because Trump's unpopularity is at another level. It is easy to imagine her facing a much tougher election against a charismatic, moderate and less divisive Republican opponent. Many moderate Republicans hope that someone in that mould can be found by 2020.
- **It could be a tough four years for the US.** From a struggling Europe to a slowing China, the world economy does not look in great shape. There are [plenty of reasons](#) to fear another global economic crisis in the near future. The global security situation is also unstable with a revanchist Russia, an unravelling Middle East and other challenges on the horizon. Even acolytes of Hillary Clinton will be worrying events over the next four years could make the next presidential election very tough for Democrats.
- **Trump and his ideas could be rebuked in November.** If, as many Republicans fear, the upcoming elections results are disastrous for conservatives, then it will be clear Trump was the wrong approach. Looking to history there are plenty of examples where the right lessons are learnt by the political parties: again, Senator Goldwater provides a possible parallel, when after 1964 the Republicans moved away from his extremism.

Given these factors, it is possible to argue that 2020 will see the rise of a more moderate Republican candidate, such as Speaker Paul Ryan, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley or even a revitalised Florida Senator Marco

Rubio. A new generation of Republican voters, [far more centrist than their older counterparts](#), may start to play a more active role in shaping the parties direction.



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So for the likes of Paul Ryan there are plenty of reasons to try and stay out of the 2016 presidential election, but to remain optimistic for the future. Instead they can focus on the long and rough process of moving the party back towards moderation and electability on the national stage.

Unfortunately for these moderates, there are also plenty more storm clouds on the horizon:

Five reasons 2020 could be even worse for moderate Republicans

- **Trump's supporters won't go away.** As I have [argued elsewhere](#), a loss for Trump supporters in November may simply make them angrier. It could prove to them that the system truly does not work. Many may argue that the real reason Trump did not win was due to sabotage or inaction by the Republican establishment. Having gained short-term influence in the party, many may run for positions of longer-term control in the GOP's various structures and seek a new candidate for the 2020 race.
- **2020 Might be Ted Cruz's year.** Runner-ups in presidential primary contests have a long-history of eventually getting their party's nomination – John McCain, Mitt Romney, George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan and Hillary Clinton. There are [many reasons why history might repeat itself again](#).
- **It's the demographics, stupid.** Republican voters are dying at a faster rate than they are being replaced. Meanwhile the Democrats are capitalising on Trump and other Republicans' recalcitrance by expanding support among Latinos, women, the young and Asian-Americans. This might be reversed if the Republicans can change course, but voting patterns tend to become entrenched after voting for the same party in three cycles. So if 2016 is another rough year, there will be a generation of voters that have favoured Democrats from 2008-2016 who will be hard to reach for Republicans.

- **Where are all the moderates?** Looking at the recent examples of Maine’s Senator Olympia Snowe retiring, Congressman Eric Cantor losing a primary selection to Governor Jeb Bush failing to gain any traction in the recent primaries – it’s clear that moderate Republicans are [becoming an increasingly rare breed](#). The party will need many more of them to form a governing coalition in the future, not just a moderate standard bearer for the presidential race like the three options outlined previously.
- **The Conservative Media Complex.** From Fox news to Rush Limbaugh to obscure blogs and tabloid newspapers – there is a whole industry in the United States dedicated to feeding the anti-establishment and conspiratorial-minded voters in the primary system. Fear and scandal sells, moderation doesn’t. And it’s not just the various media outlets – the Tea Party Movement, political action committees and, perhaps most importantly, scores of Republican politicians – all require the current system to persist. Together they are all chasing more viewers, more clicks, more votes or more money in one form or another.

So one of the biggest political battles in the United States in the next few years may well not take place in the general election or the floor of Congress. Instead a battle will go on in local party meetings, state conventions and the primary trail as moderates and others in an increasingly fractured GOP wrestle for the soul of the party.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, who is writing in a personal capacity, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics, nor of Chatham House.

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