

## *In this GOP field, moderate is relative*

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### **Body**

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Mitt Romney is the most *moderate* candidate in the Republican primaries. Yes, even more so than the recently departed Jon Huntsman, whose tax-cut proposal was more radical and more regressive, and whose endorsement of Rep. Paul Ryan's budget put him well to Romney's right on entitlements.

But compared with recent Republican nominees, Romney's policy platform is quite conservative, and arguably even a bit extreme. George W. Bush, for instance, looks like a Kenyan socialist in comparison.

"Renewing America's Purpose," the collection of policy speeches that detailed Bush's 2000 policy platform, didn't begin with tax cuts or Medicare reforms or austerity. It began with education. In fact, it began with an education speech delivered to the Latin Business Association, and before it even got to education, it talked about the "Latino economic miracle" and said "the Latino market will demand the attention of our whole economy." Then and only then did it go on to address Bush's proposal to vastly expand federal control and financing of America's education system.

Chapter 2 is "A New Agenda for Compassion." That included, by the way, the sole entry on immigration, which addressed the problem that "new immigrants are treated as suspects and strangers, not welcomed as neighbors." It then proffered recommendations for creating a kinder, gentler Immigration and Naturalization Service. The words "illegal immigrant" did not appear anywhere in the book.

Chapter 3 - Page 211, for those keeping track - is the first that any of the Republican contenders might recognize: "Strengthening Social Security and Medicare."

Here, too, Bush's words might confound the current *field*. He called for private accounts in Social Security, which to be fair puts him to the right of the current crop, though that's largely because Republicans have been cautious on Social Security since the electorate rejected Bush's plans in 2005. When he got to Medicare, however, his most concrete proposal was to expand the program to include prescription drugs - an idea that became Medicare Part D, and served as the single largest entitlement expansion since the advent of Medicare.

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Finally, in Chapter 4, on Page 245, Bush got to tax cuts. Reading his speech on the subject today, what's remarkable is how narrow a rationale Bush used to sell them. "What is risky is when politicians are given charge of a surplus," he said. "There is a strong temptation to spend it."

In other words, the tax cuts were there to prevent the surplus from being turned into spending. Elsewhere, Bush made it even clearer: "Our times allow a substantial tax cut," he said. The implication, of course, being that other times do not permit a substantial tax cut.

If any time does not allow a substantial, permanent tax cut, this is it. Deficits are large, and stretch as far as they eye - or the economic model - can see. But Romney hasn't just proposed to extend the Bush tax cuts. He's also proposed to add cuts worth more than \$2 trillion.

According to the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center, Romney's plan - which, after extending the Bush tax cuts, lowers the corporate tax rate, eliminates the estate tax and repeals some high-income tax increases from the Affordable Care Act - amounts to a tax cut of \$600 billion in 2015. The International Monetary Fund estimates America's gross domestic product will be \$18 trillion that year, so that's a tax cut of more than 3 percent of GDP. In contrast, when Bush's first tax cut was passed, the Joint Committee on Taxation estimated it would cost a shade over 1 percent of GDP. So, by any measure, Romney's tax cuts are far, far larger.

They are also more regressive. Bush's tax cut was, in theory, to be paid for out of the surplus. Today there is no surplus. Romney promises to pay for his tax cuts, but he opposes raising new taxes or cutting defense spending. That leaves domestic spending, most of which goes to seniors and low-income Americans. Nor do his tax cuts make up the difference by distributing most of their benefits among low-income taxpayers. The Tax Policy Center estimates that Romney's plan will mean an average tax cut of \$164,000 for those in the top 1 percent and \$69 - no, that's not a typo - for those in the bottom 20 percent.

So, in extending the Bush cuts and adding more of his own, Romney is proposing more than \$6 trillion in new tax cuts that will disproportionately help the richest Americans, and he intends to pay for it through spending cuts - such as block-granting Medicaid - that will disproportionately hurt seniors and low-income Americans. That's not a political attack, by the way. It's math. And it is math that makes his tax cut far more regressive than Bush's proposal.

Which is not to say Bush was a moderate. Although, in fairness to him, No Child Left Behind and Medicare Part D were compromise proposals that attracted substantial Democratic support, particularly in the Senate. It's not even to say that Romney, personally, is not a moderate. When Bush was president, Romney was governor of Massachusetts, and his signature achievement was a health-care law that later served as the foundation for President Obama's efforts.

But the Republican Party has moved far to the right since 2000, and Romney has moved with it. Bush wanted to pay down a surplus with spending cuts and expand Medicare. Romney wants to finance larger tax cuts by slashing domestic spending. It's a more regressive policy that will be paid for in a more regressive way. In today's GOP, even the most moderate presidential candidate is far to George W. Bush's right.

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