

Yes, GOP, you can make a comeback

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In 2005, Karl Rove trumpeted the coming permanent Republican majority after George W. Bush's resounding re-election victory. In 2009, James Carville is hollering about how the Republicans are in for a 40-year run as the minority party.

Well, one thing is for sure: Both the Texas architect and the Louisiana junkyard dog are wrong. Sure, Republicans have forfeited their majority-party status and ushered in a cycle of one-party control of all the levers of power in our state and national governments. But as voters more clearly understand what the Barack Obama and Chet Culver version of "change" really means, that could be short-lived, too. You see, voters are looking for change - from the ephemeral kind "we can believe in" provided by the Obama campaign to the hard-edged kind driven by today's new economic realities.

The question is can the Republican Party, riven by cultural and ideological wars, get its act together quickly enough to take advantage of what could be a seismic electoral event in 2010?

Let's start with the state of the GOP in Iowa today. Iowa Republicans comprise only 29 percent of the electorate - at least 5 percentage points behind the Democrats and lagging independents who are at 37 percent. There are over 100,000 fewer registered Republicans in Iowa today than Democrats. It's hard to win elections when you start 100,000 votes in the hole.

The party got there by driving away voters who share the Republican philosophy of limited government, but grew tired of a preachy, old party that reminded them of their grouchy, old uncle.

Recently, the Iowa First Foundation, an organization focused on research and education for Republicans, asked Iowans about the attributes of the two parties. When pressed about which party was more open and welcoming, Iowans by a 20 percent margin thought that was a better description of Democrats than Republicans. While the Democrats are perceived to be reformists, fair and the party of the future, the party of Lincoln is viewed as arrogant and backward-looking. If your business is attracting voters - and that is the only real business of political parties - the Republicans appear to have been running a going-out-of-business sale.

Now, there are some who claim that the Republicans have shrunk in numbers because they are not ideologically pure enough. Surely, congressional Republicans when in power spent the public's money like Democrats and that led to the smashing electoral defeats of the party in 2006 and 2008.

But those who are attempting to push Republicans further to the right claim that Republicans have been banished to the political wilderness because they acted with too little fealty to the agenda of the social conservatives. They argue that Republicans should act more aggressively on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage in order to reflect the biblical principles they say should drive the party's agenda.

Many of the social-conservative leaders who hold this view are well-meaning, but others simply want to further their own personal or professional interests in controlling an ever-shrinking party. They are wrong.

When Iowans are asked why have Republicans been headed in the wrong direction, both Republicans and Democrats have the same answer: Republicans have failed to open their party to young and tech-savvy voters. And the party needs to focus on the conservative economic agenda that unites the party, rather than the cultural issues that fracture it.

In fact, the Iowa First poll showed that all voter groups, including social conservatives, believe that the focus of the Republican Party should be on economic issues. This should not be surprising. A majority of Iowans have one or more socially conservative positions on issues, such as being against gay marriage. But Iowans get nervous when their politicians wear their religion on their sleeves. They, like St. Francis of Assisi, think you should live your faith and "speak only if you have to."

Thus, the clanging of cymbals and the banging of drums on faith issues in the public marketplace by some Republicans has ironically driven people away, and made even more remote the full political realization of their cause.

Moreover, Iowans, like all Americans, are economically stressed. Mortgages are tougher to pay, with incomes shrinking and jobs threatened. It's not surprising that voters want their political leaders to talk about that for a change.

And that is where the seeds of a Republican comeback lie. The Democratic agenda, save for extending health care to uninsured children, is singularly misdirected in the eyes of Iowans. In a late July poll by the Iowa First Foundation, Iowans were asked about the best way to deal with a recession: government investments to protect and create jobs or making painful decisions to cut spending and avoid raising taxes? Iowans by more than 2 to 1 select the latter, albeit painful, choice.

Consider also that Iowans:

- Strongly oppose eliminating the federal tax deduction on the Iowa income-tax return, a key initiative of the Iowa Democratic leadership.
- Overwhelmingly believe it is excessive spending by politicians - not the recession - that is the root cause of our budget shortfall.
- Would like to junk the I-Bonds program of state-government borrowing to invest in public infrastructure.

Provide viable option

The Democrats in Iowa are on the wrong side of each of these issues. Taxing the "wealthy," blaming the budget woes on the recession, and borrowing for government investments are each critical components of the policies and messages of both the Culver and the Obama administrations. The public has seen the face of Democratic change, and people don't like the way it looks.

So how do Republicans make their face the countenance of change that the public will embrace? Or will they snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in 2010? There is a clear path to victory, and it is not complicated. Its basis is the limited-government philosophy of the party, which unites its various factions. It includes:

- Focus on the economic issues. Debt, excessive spending and taxes should be the watchwords of the 2010 elections. If they are, Republicans will win.
- Be the reform party. Government should be open; government programs and bureaucrats should be accountable; and ethics reform with complete and immediate Internet disclosures should be adopted.
- Listen to voters. Use the new media to reach younger voters. Reopen the party to those who have been driven away. If Republicans just listen carefully, they'll hear that Iowans are with them on the key issues anyway.
- Recruit common sense, community leaders with government and business experience as candidates. Candidate ideological litmus tests serve only to limit the party's reach and effectiveness. Leaders who share its values and are respected in the community will be able to get the job done.

The Republican Party faces a crucial choice in 2010. It can seize the advantage it has with the issue agenda to reassess its hold on what is essentially a conservative majority in Iowa and the nation. Or it can purge and preach and feed on itself; surely the sign of a dying organism. In Iowa, the party leadership has selected the former course. Led by the tireless Matt Strawn and savvy Jeff Boeyink, the party appears ready to seize the moment. And that will leave James Carville sputtering for the next 40 years, or at least the next two.