

Turn right for right track

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By Michael Costello for the Tribune

commentary

Steven Forge - State Farm

For two years now, Republicans have played the role of the dog that chases cars, in hot pursuit of a goal, but with no clear plan what to do once they attain it. But now they've caught it, or more accurately, it was handed to them, and now they have the burden of proving that they are worthy of the responsibility that the voters have assigned them. Until now, the Republicans have profited primarily from their status as the default alternative to a Democratic Party that has given the voter every reason to turn them out.

And they don't have a lot of time to present a plan. The landscape is not what it once was. It took 40 years of the Democratic Party's arrogance and mismanagement to wear out the American people's good will before they were thrown out of power in 1994. Republicans needed only 12 years to alienate America and return control to the Democrats. This time, the Democrats turned the trick in only four years. Clearly, Americans' patience is not what it used to be.

One reason is that Americans have access to unfiltered information now. If we still lived in a world where Walter Cronkite and The New York Times held monopolistic control over information, there never would have been a Gingrich Revolution.

And this election should tell the Republicans what they need to do. After years of believing media advice that they needed to move toward the Democrats, the electorate demonstrated otherwise by tossing out moderates of both parties. On the day before the election a public opinion poll revealed that Nancy Pelosi's job approval stood at 8 percent. Eight times that many disapproved of her work. Moderates rejected the Republicans in 2006 and 2008 because they failed to draw a significant distinction between themselves and the Democrats. Pelosi highlighted that distinction for them and independent voters rejected the Democrats' vision.

The large majority of Americans have made it clear that they don't want moderation. They want decisiveness. If Republicans are capable of learning, they could take lessons from what has worked. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell both won surprising victories by promising to govern conservatively. Both have grown in popularity by adhering to those promises. This is especially notable in New Jersey as that state is about as hostile to Republicans as any in the union.

If Republicans can demonstrate that they've learned their lessons and are willing to make the difficult choices necessary to steer America back on the right track, they are likely to be rewarded in 2012, because it's unlikely that Democrats will be able to give Americans an affirmative reason to restore them to power.

Pennsylvania Gov. "Fast Eddie" Rendell probably best summarized the fatal flaw in the Democratic Party on election morning as he predicted a better than expected result for the Democrats. He credited Barack Obama with appealing to the Democratic Party base to reinvigorate their enthusiasm.

Rendell identified the "heart and soul" of the Democratic base as "blacks, Latinos, gays and lesbians."

The problem with having grievance politics as your strength is that even when you manage to win, your mandate is not the nationalization of one-sixth of the economy or an unprecedented intrusion of the federal government into every aspect of private life. You are only charged with retaliating against the dominant culture for the satisfaction of a few small slivers of the population.

Keeping that heart and soul enthusiastic also requires a constant refreshment of the culture of grievance. An outstanding example of just how difficult that cultivation has become can be found in columnist Eugene Robinson's Election Day column in which he predictably exposed racism in the Republicans' campaign battle cry: "Take back the government."

Robinson inferred from this simple slogan that Republicans meant for white folks to take back the government from a black man. In fact, the phrase is a call for a return to self government and away from the paternalistic path to serfdom that Obama and Pelosi sought to drive us down as though we were cattle.

Robinson could not possibly have found this slogan offensive if his grievance mentality had not overwhelmed his sense of irony and his long-term memory. Obama and Pelosi used those identical words in 2008.

An appeal to tribal grievance will never be a match for a defense of liberty.

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