

Republicans: To the right, march!

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

As predictable as Al Gore blaming a Hurricane Sandy on global warming, the Republican establishment is blaming the party's losses in the last election on conservatives. And that is nonsense.

A quick examination of the last three general elections disproves the theory that Republican moderation is the path to the party's resurgence. In 2008 and 2012, the GOP establishment had their man at the top of the ticket. John McCain and Mitt Romney were precisely the sorts of candidates that the establishment told us that we needed to win. Both were moderate. Both had a reputation for "reaching across the aisle."

Ronald Reagan's Commerce secretary, Malcolm Baldrige, once characterized such men as the type who, if Democrats introduced legislation mandating that Washington, D.C., be burned to the ground, would offer a compromise that would phase it in over three years.

Not only did they lose, but both pulled down the party in both houses of Congress. Romney was so uninspiring that millions of registered Republicans who usually vote stayed home. If the Republicans could have turned out their base, he would have won easily.

There wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm on the other side either. This was a race ripe for victory. Even with a larger pool of eligible voters, Barack Obama fell more than a million votes short of George W. Bush's tally in 2004. And I don't recall effervescent enthusiasm for that election either.

It took a real yawner to lose this race and the establishment found just the man for the job.

On the other hand, in 2010 when the Tea Party led the charge, the Republican Party experienced enormous gains in both houses of Congress. But even then, the establishment could only dwell on what the Tea Party didn't win. Republicans failed in two very winnable Senate races in Delaware and Nevada because Tea Party impatience with establishment Republicans led to the nomination of inexperienced and undisciplined candidates. But without the Tea Party, the GOP would not have come close enough to winning the Senate for those races to matter.

And Tea Party enthusiasm fueled historic Republican gains in the House of Representatives.

That turnaround was so startling that, two years later, the former speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi still hadn't come to terms with the fact that she leads a minority party.

If the Republican Party wishes to achieve relevance again, it needs to grow a spine and embrace some principles. And the principles of the Tea Party are rooted not so much in conservatism as they are in libertarianism. Libertarianism is precisely what was envisioned when our Constitution

was crafted. The Founders' goal was a strictly limited government, and not the amorphous, undefined power that afflicts us today.

And the idea of libertarianism would have considerable appeal if presented properly.

For example, most would rank Washington as a strongly Democratic state. It hasn't elected a Republican governor in more than three decades. Washington is so attached to the Democratic Party that it overlooks genuinely talented Republican candidates such as Michael Baumgartner and Rob McKenna and chooses instead to elect mediocrities such as Maria Cantwell, Patty Murray and Jay Inslee.

But when given the chance to vote on specific policies, Washington votes the libertarian way.

In this last election, Washington voters legalized gay marriage, decriminalized marijuana and opened the way for charter schools. These all fit nicely into the libertarian view of weakened government authority.

When given the chance, Washingtonians vote for lower taxes and to impose limits on the Legislature's authority to raise taxes.

Ron Paul's message of limited government energized Washington's young voters as no candidate in my memory ever has.

While it may seem difficult to reconcile Americans' historic love of liberty with its votes for Democratic Party candidates, the problem lies in moderate Republicans who don't even try to make the case for liberty and instead present themselves as "Democrats lite," the sort of people who will burn the nation down gradually rather than in one spectacular conflagration.

The surest path to oblivion is the one taken by Republicans who, the day after the election, said that they would have to craft policies more attractive to Hispanics if they are to have a chance to win in 2016.

Leave the pandering to the pros. Republicans and the country would be far better off if they advanced policies that served the original intent of the Founding Fathers.

Costello is a research technician at Washington State University. His email address is kozmocostello@hotmail.com.