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Memo to Democrats: Never Mind the GOP, Here's What *We* Need to Fix

The left is crowing over Republican disarray. But the progressive advantage isn't as entrenched as many of them seem to believe.

By: Jim Arkedis – March 22, 2013

If you're a Democrat and had never experienced true Schadenfreude before, chances are you did this week.

On Tuesday, the Republican National Committee released its "Growth and Opportunity Project," a document that RNC Chairman Reince Priebus dubbed an "autopsy" of his party's 2012 failings. Any self-respecting Democrat surely derived at least a little pleasure from the GOP's pain in admitting that too many Americans found the Republican Party "scary" and full of "stuffy old men." I sure did.

And the fallout has been almost more delicious. Rush Limbaughcastigated the report and insisted Republicans remain as conservative as ever. Evangelical leaders worried that a modernizing GOP would alienate its Christian base. And conservative commentator David Frum -- correctly, in my view -- lamented the lack of new policy ideas in the document.

Hysterical, right, fellow Dems? After notching a victory last November against weak competition, it's tempting to be content with our advantages in organizing, data analysis, and candidate quality, and to kick back and enjoy the Republican civil war.

Not so fast. That attitude guarantees the next defeat will come much sooner than Republican disarray suggests. Now is the time for Democrats to engage in some serious introspection of our own.

The Republican self-examination punted on policy reform. As long as the GOP keeps its policy orthodoxy leaning right, Democrats can occupy ideological territory from the middle leftward. While much of the country wishes a pox on both parties these days, President Obama's major policy positions -- on handling the economy, budget negotiations, social issues, or national security -- are at least less toxic to voters than the GOP's.

But when it comes to the mechanics, Democrats can't remain complacent. The party doesn't need the GOP's overhaul, but fine-tuning today will keep Democrats ahead of the

competition for years to come. Here are five issues Democrats must consider to ensure the 2012 victory isn't squandered.

First, progressives need to make serious investments in intellectual firepower. Democrats' advantage on policy is new and could prove temporary. Ever wonder why Republicans seem to beat Democrats off the blocks in defining the terms of so many public debates on issues from spending to healthcare?

In part, it's because of the army of analysts employed by the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Cato Institute. According to the most recent data available at Guidestar.com, these conservative research and advocacy organizations raise over \$140 million a year. Their left-leaning and much younger counterparts at the Center for American Progress, Third Way, and the Progressive Policy Institute (where I am a senior fellow) together lag behind with a meager \$40 million annual haul combined.

Closing the gap is possible but requires buy-in from on high. If a presidential candidate can legally ask donors to contribute to a super PAC, then surely a nominee -- and other prominent party figures -- can make concerted efforts to steer donors toward allied think tanks.

Second, the Democratic Party must avoid an impending woman problem -- not to mention a Latino problem, a gay problem, and a youth problem.

At first glance, these mainstays of the Obama coalition aren't going anywhere. In the 2012 contest, Barack Obama carried women voters 54-44 as Republicans self-destructed over rape and birth control, including comments largely responsible for losing Senate races in Missouri and Indiana that favored GOP candidates. Republican positions on immigration drove Latinos to vote Democrat at a clip of more than 70 percent, and nearly 80 percent of gays stuck with Obama. Young voters have been overwhelmingly drawn to the "Obama magic" since day one.

All these groups could waver if Democrats continue to exploit them as coalition building blocks and pocketbooks, rather than integrating them as full partners.

The danger is most immediate among women. Not only, for example, does President Obama's cabinet feature a striking lack of females, but women's groups are sick of being portrayed as only representing positions on abortion and birth control. And did you know that the DNC doesn't even provide childcare for convention delegates? Democrats shouldn't force parents to choose between their children and their party. Women's groups were happy with the Pentagon's decision to allow females to serve in combat, but on the whole, Democrats are sending too many negative signals to women.

Republicans have realized that passing immigration reform is a must if there's any hope of convincing Latinos that conservatives aren't xenophobes. They're right to try -- many Hispanics are attracted to the GOP's focus on family values and susceptible to "defection."

Should immigration reform fail -- a high risk in any Congress, let alone this one -- many Latino groups will sour on President Obama no matter where fault lies. Witness Hispanics' disgruntlement with the administration until it backed off on forced

deportations. That's why Democrats must broaden their focus to other issues Latinos care about beyond immigration -- such as small-business empowerment, leadership development, and increasing personal wealth.

LGBT voters, five percent of the country, are pleased with the president's personal evolution on gay marriage as well as his administration's actions on "don't ask, don't tell" and the Defense of Marriage Act. However, Republican Senator Rob Portman of Ohio's new support for gay marriage should serve as a reminder that Democratic dominance of LGBTers can't be taken for granted.

Younger voters are solidly in the Democratic camp. To capitalize on that advantage, the party needs to turn them into leaders. Leadership development groups, like the Truman National Security Project (full disclosure: I am a member), New Leaders Council, National Organizing Institute and the NewDEAL, do good work but have relatively small budgets. Meanwhile, the DNC's Youth Council has been quiet. Progressives need to direct money to leadership development both within and outside party structures.

Third, Democrats need to expand their coalition, particularly among faith voters and lower-income whites. As I've written elsewhere, polling shows that religious voters, particularly Catholics, are more open than ever to progressive faith-based messaging. And it's maddening to watch lower-income whites vote for Republican social positions and against their own economic interests. Targeted messaging to make a distinctly progressive pitch to these two often-overlapping communities on faith and social welfare will fray the conservative coalition even further.

Fourth, the party has to push digital and organizing innovations down-ballot. Pouring money into Congressional races is (comparatively) sexy, but what does it matter if Democrats are in the House minority by 17 rather than 22 seats? Not much. State legislatures are the key to controlling redistricting, and that's the key to controlling Congress. National Democrats' massive digital and organizing edge will be wasted if they are not shared with and adopted by candidates running for state legislatures.

Finally, the party needs to avoid the intramural fistfight brewing over "Organizing for Action," the president's campaign apparatus that has morphed into a voter mobilization and advocacy organization -- in other words, sort of but not exactly what the Democratic National Committee already does. Questions abound: Will OFA promote the next Democratic president's policies? Will OFA work in concert with the DNC in 2014? Will OFA suck donors away from the DNC? Unnecessary competition between them potentially means party efforts could become less than the sum of their parts. OFA and the DNC need to come to an understanding of their responsibilities, and share those decisions with party operatives.

There's no question that the Democratic Party is in a much healthier place than its Republican competition for now. But let's just remember who won that race between the tortoise and the hare -- and make sure it's not repeated with the elephant and the donkey.