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## GOP won on economy, so focus on it

By: **David Boaz**

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It always feels great to win an election. But the real job for fiscal conservatives and smaller-government advocates starts now.

The usual pattern is that after the election, voters and the activists go back to their normal lives, but organized interests redouble their efforts to influence policymakers. The people who want something from government hire lobbyists, make political contributions and otherwise do all they can to get their hands on taxpayers' money. Meanwhile, the average taxpayer cannot be expected to exert influence on each particular spending bill.

Tea partiers must change that pattern. They must keep up the pressure on Congress and state legislators. They must demand actual performance, not just promises. To keep momentum going, tea partiers should also insist that Republicans stay focused on the economic agenda that created their winning coalition, and not get bogged down in divisive social issues, which will split the movement and alienate independents.

Meanwhile, victorious Republicans must demonstrate to voters that they're serious—finally—about more freedom and less government. They destroyed the Reaganite Republican brand during the Bush years. It's harder to rebuild a brand than to destroy it. But the backlash against the Barack Obama- Harry Reid- Nancy Pelosi big-government agenda has given

them another chance.

House Republicans should:

Get serious about spending cuts. Annual federal spending rose by a trillion dollars under President George W. Bush—before the gusher of spending when the financial crisis hit. Bush became the biggest spender

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since President Lyndon B. Johnson funded the Great Society and the Vietnam War.

But Bush didn't hold that title long. Spending is now twice as large as when Bush became president, and annual deficits are more than a trillion dollars. This is Greek-style fiscal policy. All the Republicans have been promising to get spending under control, but they have adamantly avoided specifics. Now the rubber meets the road. The House must find real cuts that can reduce overall spending and lead to a balanced budget.

Start rolling back the health care overhaul. The voters didn't like Obamacare when it passed. Contrary to lots of predictions, they still don't like it. Republicans pledged to repeal it, and should keep their promise to voters. But, of course, the Senate and the president aren't likely to go along with a repeal bill. So the House should refuse to appropriate money to implement the bill's provisions, and prohibit the Department of Health and Human Services from spending any money to implement the bill's worst provisions -- especially the individual mandate.

Prevent the looming tax increase. Under current law, taxes on capital gains, dividends and everyone's income will rise on Jan. 1, 2011. Congress needs to block this looming tax increase, preferably in any lame duck session, otherwise in early January. The prospect of higher taxes is likely to discourage spending and especially investment.

Take a hard look at the war on drugs. To

drug warriors, nine years is a blink of an eye. They've been at it since 1914. Thanks to their efforts, only 119 million Americans have used illegal drugs, and only 22 million Americans use them at least once a month. Meanwhile, the violence generated by prohibition is tearing Mexico apart and spilling over the border to the U.S. Southwest. Legalizing drugs, according to a

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new Cato study, would save roughly \$41.3 billion per year in government expenditure on prohibition enforcement. If it can't just end this failed policy, Congress should appoint a blue-ribbon commission to study alternatives to prohibition.

Stand up to special interests. As noted, the moment the polls close, the organized interest groups descend on the new members of Congress. From pharma to farmers, from oil companies to the Social Security/Medicare lobbyists, everybody wants to pay off a campaign debt and take a senator to a game at the Verizon Center. Republicans -- and Democrats -- need to show some virtue and resist these organized interest groups. The country's overriding interest is to reduce spending, the deficit and the national debt. That means keeping a comfortable distance between lobbyists and the public trough. One tactic might be for the House to pass a continuing resolution to fund agencies at 90 percent of current spending, bypassing the notoriously porcine appropriations subcommittees.

Avoid social issues. When the Bush Republicans spent too much time on issues like the gay marriage ban and the Terri Schiavo intervention, they alienated suburban and professional women, college graduates, young people, libertarians and independents -- overlapping groups, of course. And they lost two elections. After 2008, they seem to have learned their lesson. Even in the face of several states instituting marriage equality, Republicans kept their focus squarely on overspending, health care and big-government overreach

-- issues that united opponents of the Obama agenda.

They shouldn't blow it now. They should stick to the economic issues that won them this election and avoid the divisive social issues that cost them 2006 and 2008.

*David Boaz is executive vice president of*

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*the Cato Institute. His is a co-author, with David Kirby, of the study "The Libertarian Vote in the Age of Obama."*

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