

# ***Dave Is Now a Democrat***

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My friend Dave is having a hard time saying it. Like Fonzie trying to apologize, he just can't get the words out of his mouth. After a lifetime of being a moderate Republican candidate, party official, consultant and Capitol Hill staffer, Dave has no trouble saying that he voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and plans to again this year. But he's having a devil of a time saying that he's a Democrat now.

Dave and I became friends in high school in the 1980s when we bonded over marching band, Huey Lewis and the News, and Republican politics.

"There was a certain magic in the Reagan optimism and a certain belief that things went wrong in the Carter years," says Dave, who was once the subject of a front-page article in our hometown newspaper in a man-bites-dog story: area teen cares about politics. We did what any two turbo-nerds would do in high school. We co-founded a Republican club. "I didn't have much prospect of dating anyway," he says. "I was one of those guys who would have changed his drivers license to vote earlier."

By the time I was a senior, I was caucusing for Jesse Jackson, but Dave venerated the Republican Party's role in ending slavery and in promoting civil rights. "I really bought into the mythology of the Party of Lincoln," says Dave, who is out of politics now and wants to keep his last name out of this for professional reasons.

Now Dave sees a Republican Party hostile to tolerance. And when it comes to Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum, "I want them badly to lose. I am actively on the other side, and I just have to accept that," he says. "I can't explain why Rick Santorum would even be invited to a dinner table conversation, let alone be considered for a major party nomination. I wouldn't let Rick Santorum babysit my kids. He talks about sex too often. When he said it was a two-man race, it gave me the heebie jeebies."

So, are you a Democrat now?

"I voted for [Obama] and don't see any reason not to vote for him again," says Dave. "It's getting harder and harder to explain why I wouldn't be a member of his party."

But still he can't say the words.

"I've been identifying as an independent, or I say I'm a liberal," says Dave, which led to a reasoned rant on the ineffectuality of the Libertarian Party. Despite his libertarian leanings -- he once had a high-profile gig for the Cato Institute -- Dave doesn't think much of their party and thinks libertarians would be better off making common cause with Democrats.

But are you a Democrat?

"I vote Democratic. I should be a Democrat. I guess someone has to take the lead and say it. I think the time has come," says Dave.

But still he wouldn't say the words.

"I feel like I'm joining the party of Stephen Douglas," he says before shooting off into a discourse on the Democratic Party's historic support of segregation.

Again Dave is brought to the question: Are you a Democrat?

"Oh God. It's not a three cheers kind of endorsement," he sighs. "There's no other viable party. Not thrilled about joining the party of Maxine Waters. I think the time has come."

But still he can't say the words.

"I'm taking a deep breath," he says. "With a heavy heart, although my dad... " And then he's off on an erudite rant about how his dad, a member of our city council, left the Republican Party in the 1980s and how Rush Limbaugh would be criticizing Reagan as an apostate nowadays. Again, he's brought back to the question.

And this time he answers.

"Yes, I'm a Democrat. How's that? Oh, my gosh," says Dave. "Saying it to you, that was profound. I might as well go down to the DMV. I guess I have to post it on Facebook now."

"Dude, this actually is really hard," he emailed later that day. "I have a physical reaction almost when I think the words 'I am a Democrat.' I'm sure it will pass."

As happy as I am that my old friend has become a Democrat, I can't help feeling a little sad for the Republican Party. When Republicans can't keep moderates who hold popular opinions on taxation and equal marriage, then Republicans have lost something more important than my friend Dave.