

Closing the Gap Between Politics and Policy at CPAC

By Marjorie Romeyn-Sanabria

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Yesterday afternoon, a panel of conservative policy luminaries shared their ideas and expertise with a small group of reporters and conference attendees. They included John Allison, president and CEO of CATO, Carly Fiorina, chairman of the American Conservative Union Foundation, Tom Fitton, the president of Judicial Watch, and Lawson Bader from the Competitive Enterprise Institute. All had gleaming resumes and extensive experience, but were as passionate about their causes as recent college graduates, an encouraging sight in a party with a reputation for stagnation. Many professionals approaching the twilight of their careers have long ago shed their idealism for pragmatic cynicism and attend panels as an opportunity to make excuses for the ineptitude of their employers. This panel not only had innovative suggestions, but also discussed how to package new ideas in ways that the average voter can connect to. The presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 demonstrated the power of effective messaging on a grassroots level, and Republicans need to stop licking their wounds and come up with effective strategies.

Fiorina, who ran for public office in California, criticized Republicans for merely lambasting Obamacare while offering no viable alternative. Though she didn't say it outright, her implicit conclusion was sobering: criticism paired with inaction was an irresponsible move, jeopardizing the already precarious health care system and costing Republicans valuable yardage on the political battlefield. One of the strategies Fiorina outlined to rectify this problem was communication with the poor—not merely buying a marketing strategy and hoping a critical mass of voters jump the fence, but taking the initiative to listen to the concerns of those struggling, and address them with dignity.

“People are poor not because they lack intellect. People are poor not because they lack ambition. People are poor not because they lack ambition,” Fiorina said. “The poor are poor because they lack the training and tools to tap their potential. They are poor because they lack the opportunities to fulfill their potential.”

This strategy and others were generally well received, but others wanted a clearer path from policies to votes. “These ideas are too intellectual,” one audience member said, visibly agitated. “I want to know how we're going to win elections!”

He had a point. Talking the high art of policy is one thing: changing voters' minds is quite another. I asked the panel how to bridge the gap between desperately needed policy recommendations and the heavy lifting of politics: phone banking, registering voters, proselytizing conservative principles. Fiorina's solution was simple yet elegant: engage the average voter with empathy and respect. If Republicans can consistently demonstrate they are willing to do more than spout rhetoric on talk shows and from the pulpit and have genuine conversations, then perhaps Republicans can repair their reputations and regain their political prowess. Effectively communicated ideas translate into changed minds, which mean a strong turnout at the ballot box for the GOP. One can only hope that they start sooner than later.