



Republican Party struggling to rebrand its politics, broaden appeal

by [Bobby Calvan](#) February 19, 2014 7:00AM ET

In the aftermath of 2012, analysts say GOP is still losing ground with ethnic minorities, women, gays and young people

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — For months leading up to the 2012 presidential election, Jimmy LaSalvia, a self-described fiscal conservative, sought a meeting with GOP candidate Mitt Romney.

LaSalvia gave money, spoke on national television to praise Romney's agenda and even showed up in New Hampshire offering to wave signs, walk precincts — anything to help the former Massachusetts governor win the White House. But LaSalvia, who as founder of GOPride was a self-appointed Republican ambassador to the gay community, felt rebuffed and ignored.

Last month LaSalvia bolted from the GOP, repudiating his former party as “out of touch” with most Americans and beyond hope. “Why waste my time to help these folks, when it's just too late?” he said to Al Jazeera. “What we see are Republicans demonizing certain groups, whether it's gay people, immigrants or Muslims. Anybody who's ever felt different understands what that's like.”

The defection was the latest sign that the Republican Party has a tough road ahead to rehabilitate its image among many segments of the population — blacks, Latinos, Asian-Americans, women

and the young — that may feel alienated by the party’s hard-line approach to hot-button social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage and on some key policy debates, like immigration.

For all the hand-wringing over its inability in 2012 to win key demographic groups, the GOP doesn’t have much time to win converts before the 2016 presidential election. In an election postmortem released a year ago, the party acknowledged that it was “increasingly marginalizing itself” and launched a national rebranding campaign as part of its Growth and Opportunity Project.

“Young voters are increasingly rolling their eyes at what the party represents, and many minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country. When someone rolls their eyes at us, they are not likely to open their ears to us,” the report said.

There was no doubt that black voters would overwhelmingly support President Barack Obama in his re-election bid — and they did, 93 percent to 6 percent — but the GOP thought it could better compete for Latinos and Asian-Americans as well as for the female and youth votes. But they were wrong.

Instead, women favored Obama by an 11-point margin, according to the University of Connecticut’s Roper Center. Hispanics voted 71 percent to 21 percent for Obama, while 73 percent of Asian-American voters supported the president’s re-election. And the clear majority of younger voters — 60 percent of those under 30 — sided with Obama.

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Romney won big among older white men. But that wasn’t enough, and Republicans don’t want to repeat the 2012 experience.

The party hopes to be more aggressive in competing for the hearts and minds of the country’s young — even before they are of voting age.

The Young Republicans Federation of Virginia, for example, is expanding its outreach to young people by establishing political clubs at more high schools, particularly in Northern Virginia, where Republicans need to better compete with Democrats, said Joseph Desilets, the group’s 22-year-old communications director. “We need to find ways to get them in the door,” he said. “Studies show that if you don’t get them young and keep them voting for you, you’re going to lose them.”

To survive, the party needs to go beyond its base of older white men to be more inclusive of the broader population, said David Lampo, publications director at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank.

“The autopsy was a great start,” said Lampo, a libertarian who is gay and authored a book on why Republicans should support gay rights.

“But the old saying that talk is cheap is true,” he said. “We can’t just market ourselves differently and not bother to make any real changes. There is going to have to be substantive change — a change in tone and a change in policy.”

That could mean wresting control of the party platform from the evangelical right, he said, to focus on its stated fiscal values and a more pragmatic approach to governance rather than concentrate on social issues.

Since the 2012 election, the Republican National Committee has hired scores of new staffers, many of them reflecting the diversity the party seeks to reach. “The RNC is making unprecedented investments in engaging all communities and voters year round in places they live, worship and work,” said Jason Chung, who was hired to spread the party’s message of inclusiveness among Asian-Americans, a voting segment that was especially crucial in Florida and Virginia, where Obama won by very slim margins.

‘Marketing that message’

Professor Felipe Korzenny, director of Florida State University’s Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication, applauds the GOP for addressing its failings. But it remains to be seen, he said, if the party’s actions reflect its talking points. “In public relations, when you have a crisis, you usually do a lot a better if you recognize that you made mistakes and that you are willing to work to do better,” he said. “Republicans need to say, ‘We’re sorry. We screwed up, but we’re willing to do good by the American people.’”

“They can say that they’ll be a little more inclusive and egalitarian, but marketing that message can only do so much,” said Korzenny, who is of Mexican heritage.

Many Latinos perceive the GOP as the party of deportations and border guards, despite some high-profile voices within its ranks who advocate an overhaul of the country’s immigration laws, including potential paths to citizenship for some of the country’s 12 million undocumented residents. What’s more, polls show strong support among Latinos for ‘Obamacare,’ the federal health care law, and are turned off by the GOP’s persistent attempts to undo it.

Meanwhile, eroding support from Asian-Americans, the country’s fastest-growing demographic, provides fresh evidence of how far the Republican Party has fallen out of favor with many nonwhite voters. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush got 55 percent of the Asian-American vote. Two decades later, Obama won re-election with 73 percent of the Asian-American vote.

To reverse the slide, the GOP will have to recalibrate not only its message but also its policies, according to Christine Chen, executive director of Asian and Pacific American Islander Vote, a nonpartisan group based in Washington.

“It just can’t be all talk and showing up at community events and spending money on (Asian-language) ads,” she said. “They have to demonstrate it by how they vote on issues and legislation that we care about.”

Of course, the party establishment doesn't always have full control of its various wings, amid clear schisms between the party's traditional and more pragmatic pro-business faction and the more ideologically purist tea party and evangelical wings.

As a result, the party sometimes seems to be sending mixed messages that could ultimately work against convincing mainstream America that it is genuine in expanding its tent, said Kyle Kondik, a political analyst at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

"Sometimes, it's hard to ask someone to take their medicine," he said, "when they think they're perfectly healthy."