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Monday, July 6, 2009 |

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GOP Needs Fewer Puritans, More Small-Government Conservatives

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Published: July 5, 2009

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford was the emerging leader of the Republican party's Reaganite, fiscal-conservative wing. Can he still be a player after revealing an extra-marital affair?

Sanford isn't the first Republican leader to stumble in his private life.

He's not even the first one this month. A week earlier, it was Sen. John Ensign (R-Nev.) revealing his own affair. And these revelations hurt Republicans more than Democrats because of the perception that Republicans set themselves up as moral arbiters. So Democrats are, in the unusually honest words of talk show host Bill Press, "gleeful tonight because another Republican hypocrite bites the dust."

If the Republicans keep making morality a public issue, and then fail to live up to those standards themselves, they're in for a long period in the wilderness.

After the revelation of the affair, The Washington Post dubbed Sanford "a Bible-quoting social conservative." Nancy Pelosi's filmmaking daughter calls him "another family values hypocrite." But let's keep this hypocrisy charge in perspective. True, Mark Sanford quotes the Bible -- along with Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, and Scottish historians. He's a quoter. He's anti-abortion and has opposed gay marriage and civil unions.

But until his downfall he was never regarded as a vocal social conservative. He was a tax-cutting, budget-cutting fiscal conservative who was the most vocal opponent of President Obama's massive spending

increases. He'd even been accused of being a libertarian for his emphasis on economic issues and his opposition to the intrusive Real ID program.

As a small-government conservative who focused on cutting the size of government, he stood squarely in the tradition of Ronald Reagan. And maybe also the tradition of former Sen. Phil Gramm, who ran for president in 1996. When "family values" leaders challenged Gramm's emphasis on economic issues, he told them, "I ain't running for preacher."

Of course, Bill Clinton was elected and re-elected despite evidence of his imperfections as a husband -- and a strong majority of voters did not think he should resign after his affair with a White House intern. But voters seem to judge Republicans, who tend to make private morality a political issue, differently.

So this looks like a huge setback for Sanford, for the small-government voters he might have led, and for the Republican Party, which is desperately in need of a leader who can restore the GOP's reputation for fiscal responsibility.

Maybe it's time to stop demanding perfection from politicians. The current combination of religious-right moralizing and the 24-hour news cycle means that elected officials are subjected to scrutiny that few of our past presidents could have survived.

In 1987, Judge Douglas Ginsburg was forced to withdraw his nomination for the Supreme Court because he was discovered to have smoked marijuana. But now our last three presidents have acknowledged youthful drug use.

In his book *The Age of Abundance* and in other writings, my colleague Brink Lindsey has argued that there is a "libertarian center" in American politics.

Over the past 40 years or so, we have eliminated many government restrictions on both personal and economic freedom. Abortion, birth control, interracial marriage, and homosexuality are legal. Divorce laws have been liberalized, and free speech is better protected. And at the same time top income tax rates have been reduced, and New Deal-era micromanagement in the transportation, energy, communications, and financial sectors has been rolled back.

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, since the 2008 election the number of independents has been growing, and they tend to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal. That's a constituency Republicans must appeal to.

Even among Republican voters, exit polls in 2004 found that 28 million Bush voters supported either marriage or civil unions for same-sex couples -- suggesting that lots of Republicans don't fit the popular image of the socially conservative "Republican base."

Young voters are another constituency disgusted with the current Republican Party. Barack Obama carried young voters by more than two to one in the 2008 election. Voters 18 to 29 delivered Indiana and North Carolina to Obama. Republicans can't win the future without doing better among young voters, and their image as narrow-minded moralists is a big obstacle.

Voters overlooked Bill Clinton's private sins because they liked his approach to politics and policy. Are Republican voters ready to do the same? If they insist that their leaders be Puritans both publicly and privately, they're likely doomed to a long winter of disappointment.

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