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Cato Looks at GOP Civil War

By Robert Feinberg

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In a recurring theme of these articles, the Cato Institute recently hosted a book forum featuring Ed Hudgins, director of advocacy and senior scholar at the Atlas Society, discussing his new book, *The Republican Party's Civil War: Will Freedom Win?*

John Samples, Cato's vice president and in-house publisher, moderated the event, and Henry Olsen, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, provided expert commentary. The discussion flowed very neatly from a provocative introduction by Samples to the optimistic argument by Hudgins, followed by a dose of hard reality from Olsen.

Most important is the basic premise, which is that the Republican Party is mired in internal strife that dates back roughly a century. The panelists agreed that the Republicans are on a streak of losing the majority of the vote in five of the last six presidential elections, and in order for that to change, something would have to change as far as how the party goes about building a majority coalition. This writer's view is that the Republican turnout has declined in each of the past two presidential elections, and the Tea Party is poised to withdraw even more disenchanting conservatives from the turnout in 2016.

In his introduction, Samples dated the modern Republican Party to the victory of Ronald Reagan to 1980. (Another view would date the demise of the party to the same event, because this was when the Bush family came onto the scene.) Samples dates the Reagan period to 1997, when the congressional Republicans did a budget deal with President Clinton and the evangelical movement began to assert itself more vigorously within the party. He also sees a departure from Reagan's platform in the promotion by Republicans of the costly Medicare prescription drug program and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, all leading to "electoral disasters" in 2006 and 2008.

Hudgins labeled the current state of affairs as a "crisis" for the GOP, one that would not be resolved by taking control of the Senate. His presentation consisted of four parts: 1) viewing the party as broken into three factions — establishment, pro-welfare state; extreme social-issue conservatives; and libertarians, 2) expressing alarm over adverse demographic trends facing the party, 3) identifying a need to unify the party behind a Freedom Agenda and 4) warning that if the party doesn't transform itself, Republicans "will die in servitude." Hudgins is optimistic that an appreciation of the need for change will yield the desired result.

Olsen responded by wielding a dazzling arsenal of polls, demonstrating a command of the political landscape that rivals legends like Michael Barone and Tom Davis. His analysis of the party factions is similar to Hudgins', but as he laid it out he concluded that of the four groups (somewhat conservatives, moderates, social conservatives and libertarians), it would be difficult

for three of the groups to have a candidate running on a Freedom Agenda. The circumstance is especially difficult when trying to address younger voters, because even though they sympathize on some issues, they proceed from a base of support for big government. Specifically, he looks at the groups to whom Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., is aiming his message and sees trouble ahead.

If Olsen is right, for the Republicans to win a presidential election would require a fracture of the Democratic Party even worse than the deep-seated schism in the GOP; one that is not in sight.