

The Star-Ledger

GOP needs a 47 percent solution

By: Paul Mulshine – March 17, 2013

The attendees at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference spent most of last week agonizing over Mitt Romney's defeat in November. A lot of people had good ideas for how the GOP can win the White House back.

One guy who didn't was Foster Friess. Friess is a billionaire businessman from Wisconsin who bankrolls Republican candidates. In return, he was presented with the Conservative Philanthropy Award from the American Conservative Union. That occurred right before Romney's speech Friday afternoon, which was billed as his first big speech since losing last year.

A big reason for the loss was that remark Romney made about his "47 percent" of voters who get more from the government than they pay in taxes. It was a gaffe, but only in the sense that a gaffe represents a telling of a truth best left unsaid. The GOP really does have a hard time reaching the poorer half of the voting public. But how to correct that?

Friess had a brainstorm. While making phone calls for Romney, he'd spoken with a guy who'd been invited to dinner by the Obama crowd. "How do we combat that?" Friess asked. "We can all, everyone of us here, have a freedom dinner. Go to the country club. Get all your friends there, and have a speaker."

Ah yes, the country club! That's a good place to find all those working Americans, Latinos, blacks and others who persist in voting for the Democrats.

Without intending to do so, Friess pointed out the Republicans' problem much better than Romney did. His speech was perfunctory, with the usual applause lines about God and country. The closest he came to discussing that 47 percent issue was when he said, "Like you I believe a conservative vision can attract a majority of Americans."

Perhaps he was talking about getting rid of Obamacare. If so, he couldn't have been thinking of that book of his that's for sale in the exhibit hall downstairs. It's titled "No Apologies – Believe in America" and it came out in 2010. The author is a certain former governor who devoted a chapter to urging Obama to push for national passage of the plan he implemented in Massachusetts – individual mandate and all.

Why did the GOP nominate this guy? Because the Republicans traditionally pick their leader based on who's next in line – just like they do in country clubs.

The good news this year was that the conference was packed with young people who want that tradition to change. A big break with tradition came the day before, when Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul called for decriminalization of drug use. That would have

brought boos back in the Bush years. But things have changed at CPAC due to an infusion of young people brought into the GOP by Rand and his father Ron, the former Texas congressman who lost to Romney in the presidential primary.

That was evident when a panel discussed cutting the military budget just before Romney spoke. Three of the four panelists were opposed to any cuts. They threw out the usual red-meat lines about the need for the United States to run the entire world. The audience wasn't biting. The biggest applause went to Chris Preble of the free-market Cato Institute, who argued that "the U.S. can't be the first responder to every 911 call on Earth."

That didn't stop Romney from repeating the standard lines about the need for even more wars of liberation. But the last presidential candidate to win on that platform was George W. Bush, and that was way back in 2004.

The next candidate will need to try a new tack. But that won't be easy, thanks to that 47 percent problem Romney noted.

Both he and Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, who spoke earlier in the day, devoted considerable attention to the national debt and how it has grown under Obama. But try to name a state Obama lost because he spent a lot of borrowed money. I sure can't.

Voters don't mind future debt anywhere near as much as they mind cuts in current entitlements. Ryan's proposal to reform Medicare probably cost the pair Florida. Now he's got another such plan, but I doubt it would be popular among the people the party needs to reach.

Heck, I doubt if cutting Medicare is popular even in the country club. If Freiss ever has a speaker at his, I sure hope it's someone who's got a better idea how to win an election than Romney had.