



HOW NOT TO REFORM THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

By: David Lampo - December 2, 2012

While most Democrats are still gloating about the recent election results, Republicans are in a full-throated what-went-wrong self-examination. Most have a theory about why Romney lost: Hispanics turned off by a strident anti-immigrant stand; women turned off by anti-abortion candidates like Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock; younger voters turned off by the anti-gay Republican platform. These groups in fact represented a larger share of the electorate this year than in 2008, so Republicans certainly have cause for concern.

There is some truth in all of these theories. While Gov. Romney narrowly won independents, a turnaround from four years ago, President Obama won these other groups by wide margins. Clearly, many or most of these voters were turned off by the overtly rightwing positions on social issues held by the Republican Party and endorsed, if only half-heartedly, by Romney himself. While Gov. Romney generally steered clear of social issues during the general campaign, Christian Right candidates kept shoving them back into the spotlight, a godsend to Democrats that reinforced their talking points about a Republican war on woman, gays, and racial minorities.

But on the Christian Right, there's a completely different theory about why Romney lost: he wasn't conservative enough on social issues. This is not a new theory; after McCain's defeat four years ago, prominent rightwing spokesmen argued he lost because he was too moderate. Ironically, they said that only a few months after they had praised the Republican ticket as the best in years because of the addition of Gov. Sarah Palin, arguing that she fired up the base like never before. This year, turnout by white evangelicals was actually up even though Republican turnout overall was down, and Romney won 78 percent of their votes. The contrast between Romney and the president on social issues could not have been greater, so it simply defies belief that social conservatives weren't motivated to turn out against the president.

Rather than acknowledge that most Americans disagree with their views, some on the right continue this line of attack. A recent example was Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas and a prominent spokesman for the more extreme wing of the Christian Right. Jeffress made national news this year when he compared Mormonism to a cult. Writing recently in the Washington Post, Jeffress conceded that evangelicals “are a diminishing minority in America,” and that many of them believe they’ve already lost the culture wars, but he argued that Republicans should nevertheless choose presidential candidates who are outspoken in their opposition to gay marriage and abortion rather than candidates who focus on economic issues. He claims this will lead to victory for Republicans, but his reasoning is, to say the very least, odd. To make such candidates more appealing to moderate and independent voters, he argues, they should repudiate many of the traditional anti-big government positions the Republican Party has long held, such as opposition to Obamacare. In order to advance what he labels the “biblical absolutes,” Republicans should compromise on what he calls their “political preferences,” the very economic issues that have defined the Republican Party for generations. “We must be willing to bend on the latter if we want our moral agenda enacted,” he says. He never explains how that social agenda will be enacted when most voters oppose it.

Contemplate the tortured logic of this proposal: If the Republican Party would simply repudiate its core principles of support for limited government and free markets and instead make its primary focus an anti-gay, anti-abortion social agenda, it will win presidential elections by bringing more social conservatives to the polls and drawing more independent voters. Mr. Jeffress doesn’t offer any evidence for why establishment Republicans, Tea Party members, or libertarians would find this a more appealing agenda than what we have now. In fact, most of them would reject it out of hand. It is a prescription for a third party comprised of all the disaffected Republicans his agenda would drive out of the party.

The idea that voters would flock to a new Republican Party that puts social issues at the top of its agenda while compromising its free market views on economic issues is ludicrous. Republicans may disagree about a lot of things, but one thing most of them should agree on right now is to exclude Mr. Jeffress and his like-minded colleagues from the debate over the future of the Republican Party. Otherwise, it will join the Whigs in the history books as just another defunct political party.