

Richmond Times-Dispatch

[OPINION:](#) | [Editorials](#) | [Letters](#) | [Commentary](#)

Monday, October 12, 2009 |

[Midlothian, VA 57°](#) Feels Like: 57° Overcast

Can the Republicans Grasp Opportunity for Revival?

Text size: [small](#) | [medium](#) | [large](#)

DAVID BOAZ TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

Published: October 11, 2009

American voters have been demonstrating a lack of confidence in both parties lately. George W. Bush nearly destroyed the Republican Party, but Barack Obama is giving it a chance at resurrection.

Karl Rove dreamed that he and Bush, like strategist Mark Hanna and President William McKinley in 1896, would create a generation of Republican dominance. Instead, he delivered both Congress and the presidency to the Democrats.

Bush turned off libertarian-leaning moderates and independents with his profligate spending, his excessive social conservatism, and the foundering war in Iraq.

Some of those independents voted Democratic in 2006 and 2008, figuring that the Democrats would be more tolerant and could hardly be more profligate. And what are they now seeing?

President Obama is exceeding all their fears on fiscal and economic issues. After promising a "net spending cut" during the campaign and denouncing "the most fiscally irresponsible administration in history," he has sent federal spending and the deficit soaring into the stratosphere. And voters simply don't believe his claim that he can extend health insurance to 47 million more people and extend mandated coverage without added costs.

Independents who turned against the Republicans are likely to become equally disillusioned with Obama, and there's already some evidence of that in the polls.

Support for "smaller government with fewer services" has risen in the ABC News/Washington Post poll, and independents prefer it by 61 percent to 35 percent, a margin three times as large as a year ago. The number of people who see Obama as an "old-style tax and spend Democrat" has risen by 11 percentage points.

Voters are turning against a year's worth of takeovers, bailouts, and new spending programs. Ironically, the first four months of those programs were actually Bush's doing. But Obama "owns" the whole shebang now.

In a July USA Today poll, a majority oppose Obama's health care efforts and 59 percent say he's spending too much. In an ABC News/Washington Post poll the same month, only 25 percent "strongly approve" of his health care plans, and 33 percent strongly disapprove.

Obama remains personally popular, even as support for his programs drops. But his honeymoon may turn out to be as passionate, yet brief, as a Hollywood marriage.

Despite the growing disillusionment with Democratic spending plans, polls still show that voters prefer that Democrats control Congress after next year's elections. However, the latest poll shows a three-point Democratic lead, down from seven points in July and nine points in April. And that margin is far smaller than the massive 19-point lead Democrats held over Republicans in June 2008. So in less than a year and a half, the Democratic margin has fallen from 19 points to three, the party's smallest lead since 2004.

Republicans still face the challenge of uniting their party around economic issues of lower taxes and less spending, rather than driving away moderates, professionals, and rugged-individualist Westerners with their socially conservative crusades.

In usually Republican Virginia, gubernatorial candidate Bob McDonnell saw his lead cut in half when The Washington Post uncovered a document in which he had proposed that Republicans seek to "punish" homosexuality and declare working women "detrimental to the family."

One big problem for Republicans in 2006 and 2008 was that their own voters were embarrassed and disillusioned, while Democratic activists were energized. In 2010, as in 1994, it looks like conservatives and Republicans will be the energized, determined part of the electorate. The GOP is raising more money than the Democrats this year, a rare accomplishment for the minority party. One advantage for Democrats is that in 1994, no one saw the Republican surge coming. This time, people do.

Charlie Cook, the dean of political prognosticators, may have been a bit too strong when he said that the growing fears of moderate and independent voters that "Washington was taking irreversible actions that would drive mountainous deficits higher, . . . that government was taking on far more than it could competently handle and far more than the country could afford, [and] expanding too far, too fast" should "terrify" Democrats. But they are no doubt worried.

David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of "The Politics of Freedom."
Contact him at dboaz@cato.org.

Reader Reactions

Posted by ([ericdondero](#)) on October 11, 2009 at 11:14 am

Mr. Boaz is right on Bush dissapointing us libertarians on spending and taxes. However, he's dead wrong on foreign policy.

The majority of us libertarians, most especially those of us who describe ourselves as libertarian Republicans, cheered on his vanquishing of the tyrannical Taliban and the murderous Saddam Hussein.

Nobody who calls themselves a libertarian could in any way, manner, shape or form, oppose the ousting of these two totalitarian regimes.

Mr. Boaz may be a "fair-weather libertarian," supporting liberty for himself, but not for others, most especially for those overseas.

Eric Dondero, Publisher
Libertarian Republican

Report Inappropriate Comment

Page 1 of 1