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Memo to Republicans: It's Big Government, Stupid!

The suburban voters the GOP desperately needs aren't culture warriors. But they're mad as hell about what the Democrats are doing to the economy.

Riding a record of unprecedented government spending, rising debt, a government takeover of the health-care system, high unemployment, and proposals to tax everything they stumble across, Democrats have put themselves in position for an epic electoral defeat that will rival the Republican debacles of 2006 and 2008.

Given this record of Democratic ineptitude and the voters' reaction to it, one would think that Republicans would be talking about these issues every day. Instead, Republicans and conservatives have spent recent weeks talking about such distracting side-issues as immigration, the 14th amendment, gay marriage, and when and where mosques should be built.

No doubt these are important issues to various constituencies. But, the merits of the issues aside, if Republicans believe that the key to victory this year is to refight the culture wars, they are mistaken.

Today, the Republican base is fired up, and Democrats are dispirited. To see how important that is, look no further back than 2008, when overall Republican voter turnout was down by 1.5 percent. Putting this in perspective, in the crucial swing state of Ohio, Barack Obama received 40,000 fewer votes in 2008 than did John Kerry in 2004. Yet, Obama carried the state while Kerry lost it.

Despite their repeated threats to stay home if Republicans deviated from a commitment to conservative social issues, it wasn't the Religious Right that deserted Republicans in 2008 (or 2006, for that matter). Turnout among self-described members of the Religious Right remained steady from 2004 to 2008, and these voters remained loyally Republican. Roughly 70 percent of white evangelicals and born-again Christians voted Republican in 2006, and 74 percent in 2008, essentially in line with how they have been voting for the past two or three decades.

It was suburbanites, independents, and others who were fed up with the Republican drift toward big government who stayed home — or, worse, voted Democratic in 2008. Republicans carried the suburbs in both 2000 (49 to 47) and 2004 (52 to 47), but in 2008, suburban voters — notably wealthy, college-educated professionals, many of whom consider themselves moderate on social issues but economically conservative — voted for Barack Obama by a margin of 50 to 48. The switch among voters in the suburbs of Columbus, Charlotte, and Indianapolis, for instance, was largely responsible for moving Ohio, North Carolina, and Indiana into the Democratic column. Democrats also continued their gains in the more independent, libertarian West.

These independent and suburban voters are now regretting their Democratic flirtation. They didn't vote for record deficits, the health-care bill, bailouts to banks and auto companies, or cap-and-trade. Having rejected big-government conservatism, they never realized they were going to get even-bigger-government liberalism.

But these voters are not culture warriors. Polls show that while they are fiscally conservative, and very upset by excessive government spending and rising deficits, they are socially moderate, tending toward indifference or even support on issues like gay marriage.

It is true that many vulnerable House Democrats this year represent culturally conservative districts. But those Democrats are likely to share the same positions on social issues as their Republican opponents. One is not likely to get to the right of, say, Tom Perriello (D., Va.) on social issues. But if cultural issues come to dominate the fall campaign, it could hurt Republican candidates in more moderate suburban districts — candidates like, say, Keith Fimian, who is challenging Gerry Connolly in northern Virginia. On the other hand, both Connolly and Perriello voted for the stimulus, the health-care bill, and cap-and-trade.

If one needs a template for victory, Republicans need look no further than last year's gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey. Bob McDonnell and Chris Christie did not run as culture warriors. Instead they won their upset victories on issues like jobs, the economy, and a commitment to limited government.

The polls are overwhelming. Those are the issues that voters care about, not whether two men in California get married. Republicans should focus on creating jobs, reducing spending, repealing Obamacare, and cutting the size of government — and leave the culture wars for another day.

— *Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution.*