



Why Republicans have to evolve on social issues to win elections

Thu, 12/06/2012 - 10:28am | posted by [Jason Pye](#)

Yesterday, I had the opportunity to speak at the [Cato Institute](#)'s New Media Lunch on some of the issues facing the Republican Party after the 2012 election. The forum, focused exclusively on social issues, was appropriately headlined as "The Republican Problem."

While Walter Olson went over gay marriage, Rob Kampia on marijuana policy, and Alex Nowrasteh on immigration, I tried to focus on how conservative activists and the conservative blogosphere are adjusting post-2012. With that, I wanted to mention some of what I briefly talked about yesterday in a post this morning.

In the days since the election, I've spent a lot of time on Twitter and Facebook reading comments from conservative activists and bloggers. They realize that they have a lot of work ahead of them and they can [no longer afford to live in a bubble](#). They see that social issues — such as gay marriage, the war on drugs, and immigration — present a problem moving forward.

Activist organizations are looking for ways to build outreach to younger voters and minorities, though the immigration issue remains a tough challenge for conservatives, and many are realizing that the war on drugs has failed. [Right on Crime](#), a conservative-backed initiative, has become somewhat popular as cash-strapped states look for ways to take some pressure off of their prison systems. While we as libertarians see this as a personal liberty issue, it's an easier sell as an economic issue to our conservative friends.

There are no easy answers to this question that face the GOP at the present moment. Republicans have counted on social conservatives to help them win elections in the past; especially in 2004, when referenda or constitutional amendments were on the ballot in 11 different states, including Ohio. At the time, President George W. Bush had been pushing the Federal Marriage Amendment

and the general thinking was that these amendments would help drive social conservatives to the polls and that would translate into support for his campaign.

But this issue is one that has slipped away from Republicans in recent years as more become open to same-sex marriage. Just yesterday, *USA Today* [released a new poll](#) showing that 53% of Americans now believe that same-sex couples should have the same rights as traditional marriages. This is a [9-point swing in just two years](#).

And then there is the marijuana issue. Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from 2012 is that Americans are increasingly tired of the “war on drugs.” Colorado and Washington legalized recreational use of marijuana, despite the [likelihood of the federal government trying to prevent the laws from going in effect](#).

Much like gay marriage, polls are showing movement away from the traditional conservative viewpoint. A new Quinnipiac poll [shows that 51% of Americans support legalizing marijuana](#) for recreational purposes.

At this point you may be saying that the whims of the public don’t necessarily mean that a certain issue should become public policy. I would agree with you. Just look at the debate over taxes, for example. Many polls, though not all, show that Americans agree with President Barack Obama’s proposal to make higher-income earners pay more in taxes. However, there is a difference between the social and economic issues, and it requires education.

From a philosophical angle, taxation is nothing more than legal theft; essentially the taking of property. And yes, money is property. But we live in a country where the government has certain functions, all of which are laid out in the Constitution, and those functions require funding. Of course, the Constitution we know today, which has been muddied by Supreme Court decisions that have expanded the role of government, isn’t the Founders’ Constitution. Entitlement programs have been passed and upheld based on shoddy legal theories that are far removed from the intent of the Founding generation, and taxpayers are paying for them dearly. Unfortunately, the next several generations will be hit the hardest by Washington’s fiscal profligacy.

Unlike taxation, the use of marijuana and same-sex marriage don’t harm the rights or liberties of other Americans. These are issues of personal freedom, and it’s clear that they’ve gained favor with voters, particularly with younger voters, and policies pushed by Republicans would continue

prohibition of these activities have impacted them at the ballot box, though to what extent is debatable.

On the topic of younger voters; as I've written before, this particular voting bloc has supported Obama for two reasons. First, they feel like they can connect with him in way they couldn't connect with John McCain or Mitt Romney, the latter of which was successfully defined as an out-of-touch rich guy.

Obama is a pop culture president. There isn't much substance there. He's been campaigning for the White House since he came on the national scene in 2004. Nevermind that he opposed gay marriage until earlier this year. Nevermind that his Department of Justice is still cracking down on marijuana users and state-legal medicinal marijuana dispensaries. Celebrities like Obama, and that's good enough for many younger voters. I don't think every young voter bases their vote on matters of style over substance. However, those that do are probably never going to consider voting for a Republican.

With that said, Republicans haven't done much, if anything, to reach out to younger voters. There are those in this important voting bloc who can be won over with a message of less spending, less regulation, and less taxes; all of which are consistent with the traditional conservative Republican message. But these voters don't necessarily put those issues first when deciding for whom they will vote. The GOP's views on social issues are a non-starter for them, and they'll vote for someone else because of that, in many instances.

There has also been some panic in the conservative movement and amongst Republicans over the issue of immigration. Many are looking to Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), who rode the Tea Party wave into Congress in 2010, to help provide the answers on this issue. Rubio is the sponsor of the GOP-version of the DREAM Act, legislation that would provide a path toward permanent residency for minors who graduate from schools in the United States. While he may help the GOP overcome some its problems with Hispanic voters, Rubio won't be able to undo all of the damage that has already been done.

Change on this issue has to come from the heart. It can't be forced because Hispanic voters will see right through it. Many in the Republican Party — and perhaps more specifically, in the conservative movement — preach free markets, but in the next breath they complain about immigration. What they fail to see is that immigration is a free market issue. The immigrants are

coming to our country to seek a better life for themselves and their families. Sure, we do need to have laws in place to ensure that those entering the United States aren't a public safety or health threat. But the laws currently in place are terrible, and they must be reformed — sooner rather than later.

Another point is that immigration is a net-positive for our economy. For example, a 2006 analysis by the Texas Comptroller found that undocumented immigrants were a net positive to the state budget. Moreover, they [contributed \\$17.7 billion to the state's economy and actually paid more taxes than the services they consumed](#). Studies in other states —[such as North Carolina](#), where immigration represented \$9 billion of the state's GDP — have found similar results.

This is another issue where Obama has wagged the dog. He pushes for immigration law reform and has taken steps via executive order to temporarily implement parts of the DREAM Act. However, [record numbers of immigrants have been deported](#) during his first term. Yet, he gets a pass because he says the right things and blames Republicans for not getting anything done on the issue in Congress. And Republicans have no where to go on the issue largely because of their frequently restrictionist rhetoric.

And on gay marriage, many younger Republicans are more libertarian-leaning. There are still plenty of Mike Huckabeees and Rick Santorumes in the GOP, and they're not going to go quietly on this issue. CPAC will continue to serve as a battlefield for this and some of the other issues. It may very well be the first shot in the so-called "Republican Civil War."

In the end, I don't expect that the base will be split, but I do anticipate that change needed for the GOP to be more than a regional party will take some time. Unfortunately, it's time the country doesn't have as we face much larger, much more pressing issues. But libertarians cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to help push the GOP in direction of both economic *and* personal liberty. There are no excuses for sitting on the sidelines any longer.