

Getting a running start

By David Hill

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Our third and final look at the suggestions sprouting everywhere for a new, reformed and reconstituted Republican Party starts by acknowledging a need to focus on a reordered issue agenda.

Numerous commentators, including Kimberly Strassel in The Wall Street Journal, are pointing out that past Republicans have too frequently focused on issues, like immigration, that energize only a fraction of the electorate, while largely ignoring issues that most all Americans care about, like runaway healthcare costs, energy prices and government spending. The party must sign onto a more relevant issue agenda or, alternatively, spend more time convincing voters that our priorities are more important than theirs. The latter is a much tougher assignment.

Some Republicans even suggest that old agenda items — like taxes — need to be freshened up. Writing for Time, Ramesh Ponnuru observes that, "To become relevant again, Republicans will have to devise an agenda that speaks to a country where more people feel the bite of payroll taxes than income taxes." He continues, "[A] revitalized conservatism would push for tax reform with an eye on middle-class families, not hedge-fund operators."

Still others say that Republicans need to focus on ethics. David Frum concluded in a New York Times analysis that "Republicans have been badly hurt in upper [class] America by the collapse of their one-time reputation for integrity and competence." We see this integrity challenge wrought in a recent poll I conducted that asked a cross section of Texans which party is best described as "trustworthy, honest and ethical." To our dismay, these red-staters chose the Democrats by a 12-point margin, 33 percent to 21. Obviously, sizable percentages couldn't decide. That's not a good sign either, given that most elected officials are Republicans who should be giving off the aura of operating ethically.

Frum's remarks also raise the importance of capable management of government, another challenge that Republicans need to worry about. Our poll of 636 Texans found the Democrats win the battle over which party "uses common sense to run government more efficiently and effectively." Thirty-six percent chose the Democrats and 25 percent fingered the Republicans. Again, many were unsure — not a good sign, given Republican hegemony over the Lone Star State.

There is, of course, some danger in all this reflection and rumination about what the party should be doing and why. We might find ourselves succumbing to "paralysis by analysis." That's true if this goes on for too long. But taking a period of time for introspection to sort all this out is worth the effort. Even if we take a few steps back in the process, consider it a sly tactic to get a running start on the next campaign.

The most important key to getting our future in order is finding a few strong leaders. The party has fewer acknowledged leaders at this point than at any time in decades. This is both dangerous and a cause for hope.

The party desperately needs new faces to symbolize the new ideas and options that our party will offer America. Old faces cannot do that. The danger does not lie in having "unknown" leaders. That can be fixed in short order. Look at what Sarah Palin accomplished gaining recognition in her brief tenure on a ticket. The danger lies in selecting leaders who do not grasp the scope and magnitude of the challenges we face. Those offering leadership who say the formula is no more complicated than "getting back to conservative principles" are naïve and could make matters worse.

We need savvy, thoughtful and modern leadership. That's why I am endorsing Michigan GOP Chairman Saul Anuzis for national party chairman. I know that he'll embrace the calling for the real changes Republicans need now.

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