

The GOP revival must go beyond joining Twitter

By Stuart Stevens

Stuart Stevens was the lead strategist of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign.

There seems to be a desire to blame Republicans' electoral difficulties and the Romney campaign's loss on technological failings. I wish this were the problem, because it would be relatively easy to fix. But it's not.

The "tech gap" is being pushed by some as a larger indication of the issue of Republicans being seen as old and out of date. The latest piling on was a piece by my old Austin pal Robert Draper in the New York Times magazine. Draper breathlessly reports that there are young, technology-focused Republican operatives who feel that the Republican Party should be doing more (which we should) and that, horrors of horrors, I chose not to tweet during the campaign. (For the record, I've had a Twitter account since shortly after the service launched and follow it perhaps a bit too obsessively.)

This sort of thinking is how cultures end up worshipping volcanoes: A volcano belches in a drought, it rains and the two are forever linked.

Yes, the Romney campaign won seniors and lost voters under 30, though our numbers were a significant improvement from the 2008 presidential campaign. But was this a tech-driven gap or more reflective of substance?

Like most things in life, the answer is a bit of both. I don't think it's very controversial to suggest that a candidate who favors gay marriage and free contraception might have more appeal to a younger demographic. Does anyone want to argue that free contraception is seen as a more pressing issue to your average 21-year-old than to a 55-year-old voter, or that there are more gay rights organizations on college campuses than in VFW halls?

Likewise, why did Mitt Romney win older voters? They are more concerned with the economy than with same-sex marriage, and they are more skeptical of or opposed to Obamacare. Why did 100,000-plus more African Americans in Ohio vote for President Obama than turned out four years ago? It's not irrelevant that Obamacare is most popular with African Americans. And what demographic group is the second-most favorable to Obamacare? Hispanics. Much more Obama advertising attacked Romney for opposing Obamacare than criticized him over immigration.

In this fourth decade of the Internet, one of the original truisms is still true: Content is king. The ugly, clunky Drudge Report site still harvests record numbers of eyeballs because it serves up a hearty meal at a good price: free. The content rule is true across mediums. How many graphic makeovers and relaunched has CNN attempted to arrest its slow slide? The simple truth is that most people feel there is no reason to watch CNN, and they are happy not to. Meanwhile, “Storage Wars” racks up viewers and “Dog,” the bounty hunter, has a new series.

So it is in politics. A Republican renaissance will inevitably be driven by policy. Parties must constantly reinvent themselves and prove their relevance to voters. Two of the biggest brains — and hearts — of the Bush era, Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, laid out the challenge brilliantly in an essay in the latest Commentary magazine (“How to Save the Republican Party”). Republican media strategist and commentator Alex Castellanos has launched a search for solutions called New Republican (NewRepublican.org). These efforts are exactly what Republicans need as we regroup and plan for the future.

As Robert Putnam outlined more than a decade ago in his breakthrough book “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” many of the institutions that used to bind Americans together have crumbled. Today, social media fulfill much of the need for community and togetherness that were once provided by bowling leagues, church suppers and, yes, political parties. Like interests are drawn together through the invisible connectivity of virtual communities.

Barack Obama was able to forge a powerful community in 2008 because of his message. Technology conveyed that message to millions, nurtured it and help harvest their votes. But he didn't win because he won the Facebook wars; he won the Facebook wars because he was winning.

For Republicans, this can't be an either/or choice. We need to be omnivorous in our development and consumption of new technology tools and relentless in our dedication to speak for the majority of Americans. One without the other will fail.

In the Democratic dark days after the 2004 election, few realized that the Democratic Party was only one candidate and one presidential election away from a revival that now is touted as dominance. So it can be with Republicans.

For 2016, the Democrats seem headed toward a fight between Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. Both launched their careers in the 1970s; what will their slogan be, “Another Century of Service”?

On our side, we have Paul Ryan, Nikki Haley, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, Susana Martinez and more. Who has the best opportunity to win that generational battle?
