

What Should the Republican Party Stand For?

By: Molly Ball - 02/26/13

CHARLOTTE, North Carolina -- Republicans are trying to refashion the party in the wake of their 2012 defeat. But they keep running into a problem: They can't agree on what the party's positive agenda ought to be.

Preventing President Obama and Democrats from doing things they don't like doesn't constitute a governing platform. Should the GOP take a more moderate position on immigration reform, which is popular with the public as a whole and could help the GOP with Hispanics? How about gun control, where large public majorities disagree with NRA-style Second Amendment absolutism? Are hardline Republican stances on gay marriage and abortion alienating young voters and women? Taxes and spending have been the party's traditional strength, but Obama had the public on his side in raising taxes on the wealthy, and he used Paul Ryan's proposals for trimming entitlements as a bludgeon in the presidential campaign. And when it comes to a foreign policy, Republicans are all over the map.

This is the real crisis facing the GOP: Articulating a set of stances on issues that majorities of voters agree with, in a way that convinces people they'd be able to govern if given the chance.

At the Republican National Committee's winter meeting in Charlotte this week, I posed the question, parlor-game-style, to a wide swath of GOP leaders from all over the country: What did they think the party ought to stand for? If they recited the mantra of "smaller government, lower taxes," I tried to get them to say what significant parts of the government they'd reduce and whose taxes they would cut. Here are some of the answers I got.

Dana Randall, South Dakota national committeeman: "In South Dakota, they're spending money to chase elk out of a national park, when they could be making money off people to hunt them. Our national forests could be handled more responsibly. After 9/11, they built all these fancy fences around the airport in Aberdeen, but the fence is hanging open!"

Jay Shepard, Vermont national committeeman: "I have a bit of an issue with the idea that we have to stand for something specific on every issue. Why do we have to be the pro-life party, when a huge number of Republicans are pro-choice? Why are we the only party having this discussion? You can get six Republicans talking about immigration reform and you'll hear eight opinions. We need to let people know we're not always top-down."

Mark Willis, Maine national committeeman: "A noninterventionist foreign policy, the abolition of the TSA, and ending the Federal Reserve."

Newt Gingrich, former House speaker: "We need to stand for the kind of problem-solving that leads to more economic growth, more jobs and more take-home pay. A health system that enables people to have the longest life at the lowest cost. It's going to take a decade or more of inventing big, conservative solutions House Republicans ought to hold hearings focused on waste and specific scandals. A lot of Republicans, frankly, spent the last two years saying, 'Oh, gee, we don't have to do much because after Obama loses we'll be in charge.' Well, now that world has ended."

Dave Agema, Michigan national committeeman: "Traditional family values. Fiscal conservatism, yet willing to help those in need. That's what we really are. We should have a basic safety net, but too often it becomes a hammock. Our values are what make America great -- a mom and a dad. Look what we have today with all these broken families. They have a much higher possibility of being poor."

Saul Anuzis, former Michigan Republican Party chairman: "The opportunity society -- the argument Ronald Reagan, Jack Kemp and Newt Gingrich used to make. There's a desire for it. People are just scared right now, so they want a bigger social safety net I don't think we can win being the party of 'no.' We've got to do something more."

Steve Scheffler, Iowa national committeeman: "We need to stand by our principles and not deviate. Mitt Romney had a mushy message. He didn't say anything but 'We need to get rid of Obama.' We need to talk about restoring fiscal sanity to the budget, but we can't talk about it in generic terms."

Curly Haugland, North Dakota national committeeman: "We need to reaffirm our vision of every individual in America being allowed to keep the fruits of their labor, and refute this socialism or fascism or whatever you want to call it that Obama has instituted. We should be cutting spending on this green energy. It's a disaster. There are windmills all over Iowa and North Dakota and South Dakota. It's ideology, not economics. It's a redistribution of wealth to produce something of almost no value. Wind power is practically worthless."

Mike Duncan, Kentucky national committeeman, former RNC chairman: "The trade-offs EPA is making on coal-fired power plants are costing jobs all over the country. Coal mine jobs, utility jobs, and they're costing people money through higher electric prices. When Nixon started the EPA in 1970, the air was terrible. Now, we've reduced 85 percent of the particulates in the air, and the amount being argued about is so small."

Jim Bopp, Republican National Conservative Caucus, Indiana: "Smaller government, lower taxes, so we can have more economic vitality. Yes, in this election, voters favored Obama on higher taxes on upper-income people, and he's now got that. But that's why we have periodic elections. Did he think when the people spoke in 2010 that that was the be-all and end-all?"

Ari Fleischer, former White House press secretary: "Inclusiveness. We don't have to agree on every issue. We need to say to people we disagree with on certain issues, 'We welcome you.' ... There are

people who need government, and we should recognize that. We want there to be fewer and fewer people needing government, but we have to recognize that some people do."

Glenn McCall, South Carolina national committeeman: "There are things we could cut in the Department of Education, even Defense. I served in the Air Force for 24 years. There's waste and abuse in every agency. In corporate America, you make cuts because you have to, and people whine and cry, but you get by."

Bobby Jindal, Louisiana governor: "Education policy. We need to be fighting for real choice, where the dollars follow the child instead of the child following the dollars. We need to be fighting to simplify our tax code, getting rid of all those distortions and loopholes. I've proposed getting rid of the income tax in Louisiana."

Lenny Curry, Florida Republican Party chairman: "There has to be some level of taxation or you get anarchy. It's up to Congress and the president to make those decisions. We have to fix the debt problem, and that is going to have to include reforming Medicare and Medicaid. We want them to exist in the future, but they have to be reformed. What we don't need to be is the party that stands in the middle of the road yelling, 'Stop, this is bad.'"
