

Republicans must wise up

By Eugene Robinson

The biggest problem the Republican Party faces is not uninspiring candidates or unsound tactics. It is unpopular ideas.

This reality was brought home in last month's election. It's playing out in the struggle over how to avoid the "fiscal cliff." And we'll see it again in coming fights over immigration, entitlements, inequality and a host of other issues. Here's the sad thing: Republicans get this stuff so wrong that Democrats aren't even forced to go to the trouble of getting it right.

There will be those who doubt the sincerity of my advice to the GOP, since my standing as a conservative is — justifiably — less than zero. But I've always believed in competition, if only to prevent liberals from becoming lazy and unimaginative. One could argue that this is already happening.

Take the question of what to do about undocumented immigrants. The Republican Party takes an uncompromising line against anything that could be construed as amnesty — any solution that provides "illegal" immigrants with a path to citizenship. Much has been made of the impact the immigration issue had in the election, as Latinos voted for President Obama over Mitt Romney by nearly 3-1.

It is obvious to sentient Republicans why the party cannot afford to so thoroughly alienate the nation's largest minority group. What the GOP seems not to grasp is that the party's "send 'em all home" stance is way out of line with much of the rest of the electorate as well.

A Politico-George Washington University poll released Monday asked voters whether they favored "an immigration reform proposal that allows illegal or undocumented immigrants to earn citizenship over a period of several years." That would be amnesty, pure and simple — and a whopping 62 percent said they were in favor, compared to 35 percent who said they were opposed.

You might expect Democrats, then, to be pushing hard for a straightforward amnesty bill. But they don't have to. Because Republicans are so far out in right field on the issue, Democrats haven't actually had to do anything to reap substantial political benefits. They've just had to sound more reasonable, and less hostile, than Republicans, which has not required breaking a sweat.

On the central fiscal-cliff question, the GOP is similarly out of step. The Politico poll found that 60 percent of respondents favor raising income taxes on households that earn more than \$250,000 a year. The Republican Party says no — and thus allows itself to be portrayed as

willing to sink the economic recovery, if necessary, to ensure that tycoons can keep their pantries stocked with caviar.

Where is the incentive for Democrats to get serious about fiscal matters? As long as the GOP remains adamant on what many Americans see as a no-brainer question of basic fairness, those who believe in progressive solutions get a pass.

The truth is that raising top marginal rates for the wealthy is probably as far as we should go on the tax front right now, given the fragility of the recovery. The best thing we could do for the country's long-term fiscal health is spur the economy into faster growth, which will shrink deficits and the debt as a percentage of gross domestic product.

That said, it's hard to imagine long-term solutions that don't eventually require more tax revenue from the middle class as well as the rich. But why should Democrats mention this inconvenient fact when Republicans, out of ideological stubbornness, are keeping the focus on the upper crust?

The same basic dynamic plays out in the question of reforming entitlements. Republicans proposed turning Medicare into a voucher program; polls show that voters disagree. The GOP seems to be falling back to the position that the eligibility age for the program should be raised. Trust me, voters aren't going to like that, either.

Nor, for that matter, do voters like the GOP's solution for the millions of Americans who lack health insurance, which Romney summarized as, essentially, go to the emergency room. A smart Republican Party would stop focusing exclusively on how government can pay less for health care and, instead, begin to seriously explore ways to reduce health-care costs. A smart GOP would acknowledge the fact that Americans simply don't want to privatize everything, which means we need new ideas about how to pay for what we want.

Faced with an opposition that verges on self-parody, progressive thinkers are mostly just phoning it in. This won't change until somebody defibrillates the GOP, and we detect a pulse.

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