



***The Ripon Forum***  
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**The Way Back**  
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Republicans must be wondering: Can it get any worse? As late as 2006, we held the White House and a majority in both houses of Congress. Come January, all three will be in Democratic hands – with a near-filibuster-proof majority in the Senate.

As chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee for two of its most successful cycles, I've seen our party in much better shape. But I've seen it in worse shape as well.

Republicans rebounded from landslide losses in 1964 and 1974 that were more devastating than this year's. Our presidential candidate, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., received 46 percent of the popular vote this year. He carried 22 states and came within a few thousand votes of carrying four more.

He did as well as could be expected considering the circumstances. He was outspent 4-1 as he carried the banner of a party whose two-term incumbent had lower poll numbers for a longer period than any president in American history, had involved the country in an unpopular war and had seen the economy collapse in October. No other Republican could've come close to those numbers.

But let's not kid ourselves, our party is broken. In no small way, we've been victims of our own success. We fought communism and won. We fought stagnation brought on by high taxes and restrictive government policies. Today, voters take low taxes as a given, and the burden of proof – even in the wake of the financial crisis – is on those who would regulate, not those who would remove regulations.

With the heavy lifting out of the way, we indulged in more trivial pursuits – and this led to trouble. We talked to ourselves and not to voters. We became more concerned with stem cell policy than economic policy, and with prayer in schools rather than balance in our public budgets and priorities. Not so long ago, it was easy to paint the Democrats as the party of extremists. Now, they say we're extremists, and voters agree.

As a result, we've seen our support erode. Urban centers remain under Democratic control. Exurbs and rural areas remain under Republican dominance. But in the battleground that lies between – the suburbs -- we were winning them; now we're not. Our candidates are safe in a swath that extends from North Texas across to North Alabama and up through Appalachia. Elsewhere, we are on the run. Almost every voter who can be convinced – who sometimes votes Democratic, sometimes Republican – now votes Democratic.

We've long-since given up on the African-American vote. We're forfeiting the Hispanic vote with unwarranted and unsavory vitriol against immigrants. Youth vote? Gone. We ask for nothing from these idealistic voters, we offer little except chastisement of their lifestyle choices and denial of global warming, and we are woefully behind the Democrats in learning how to connect with them.



Soccer moms? They're not comfortable with much of our social policy agenda, so many are gone as well. NASCAR dads? They're our last redoubt, and the trends even there are not encouraging as unemployment rises and 401 (k)s are decimated. They want clean, competent government that meets basic challenges. They don't see tax cuts or stimulus checks that net them another \$500 per year as meaningful, and they are not comfortable with the profligate deficits that result. As one veteran Republican campaign professional told pollster Charlie Cook: Voting for tax increases hurts politically much more than voting for tax cuts helps.

So what do we do? First, we eliminate checklists and litmus tests and focus on broad principles, not heavy-handed prescriptions. Free trade. Strong defense – at home and abroad. Government as small as is practicable in these times. Economic, education and energy policies that promote growth, energy independence and a competitive agenda that will allow businesses to grow and compete, not be protected by artificial barriers.

That's it. Believe anything else you want, but advocate for those things outside the structure of the party.

Second, remind ourselves the first principle of conservatism is not tax cuts or free trade or even smaller government. It is prudence, and prudence should be our guide. Prudence dictates we take seriously the concerns of those who elect us and tailor our policy proposals to counter the government-mandate-heavy ideas bound to emerge from the other side.

Americans want something done about the 43 million of us who lack health care. The question is not: Should government care? It must. The question is: Do we get a top-down, Washington-knows-best, one-size-fits-all "solution" or a Massachusetts-style program that preserves choice for patients and discretion for doctors?

Prudence dictates we build on the No Child Left Behind Act and get serious about education reform. Americans demand top-notch schools, and it is our constitutional duty to ensure this happens. Yes, constitutional. We've reached an age where we can't, in practice, provide for the common defense or compete economically without an educated citizenry. We should maximize local control ... so long as local control is working. We need to measure, and we need to see that failure is addressed. Remember, it's about the students, not the institutions.

Prudence dictates we pursue energy independence on all fronts. It is our key to a secure future and our bulwark against the price swings we've endured in recent years. Moreover, our views enjoy broad support, and we should press the advantage. Americans support drilling offshore and in areas of oil-rich Alaska now deemed off-limits, because they know we can do it safely. They know, with 250 million cars on our roads, that fossil fuels – oil, coal, natural gas – represent at least part of our energy solution. They also know we can't continue to depend on dysfunctional countries for our energy supply. They know we can conserve more, do more to develop alternative fuels, including nuclear, and adapt smarter policies to get the most from our potential. We were on the right track with this in the 110th Congress, and we should press forward.

The energy legislation we'll see in the next Congress will give Republicans a great opportunity to draw bright lines between our policies, which promote growth, innovation, prosperity and choice, and

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Democrats' policies, which promote regulation and top-down government dictates and invariably reduce the quality of life. We must remind voters that making energy plentiful and affordable remains the best thing governments can do for the environment.

What we can't do is go back. I've heard much talk of going back to our conservative roots, to the issues that helped us win in 1980 and 1994. That issue matrix has changed so much as to be nearly unrecognizable now. The voters who dealt us our electoral disasters in 2006 and 2008 did so because they thought we were all too true to our roots. That we were exclusive, favored rich over poor, and didn't care sufficiently for the plight of the little person.

Also, I suspect this call to return to our "roots" really is a call to do nothing. And doing nothing, I hope Republicans will agree, is not an option.

We need to talk less about the size of government and more about its efficiency. Voters want action on the issues that affect them most: energy, security, education, transportation and health care. We need to show these issues can be tackled without creating huge government bureaucracies or necessitating growth-killing tax hikes.

We also need to stop talking about how much we hate government if we expect people to elect us to run it. Perfecting it, reducing it to its ideal size, having it accomplish what we need with minimal resources requires that we embrace it and study it and work hard at it.

Also, as Newt Gingrich has pointed out, we need to remember that every election is important and that it's important we field good candidates in every race. Eight years ago, we found out it mattered a great deal who the Secretary of State in Florida was. We need to find new leaders and nurture them and re-invest in the organizational infrastructure we need to build our base of volunteers and, again, have the best get-out-the-vote effort.

All is not lost. Even today, significantly more voters identify themselves as conservatives than liberals. They want us to succeed, and they don't want to return to a society of handouts and big government. But we won't get there by waiting for the Democrats to fumble the ball. We won't get there by trying to divine what Ronald Reagan would do in any given situation. We can get there, though, if we stop the infighting and show we have a better way.

The party with the best, freshest ideas always wins. That can be us – that needs to be us – once again.