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The Winning Agenda

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If you knew that a recent Zogby International survey found 59 percent of the respondents described themselves as "fiscally conservative and socially liberal," and if you were a head of a political party wanting to put together a winning platform, what would you do?

The question is not all that tough, but both Republican and Democrat leaders have yet to get it right. The Republicans, after losing three straight, off-year special congressional elections, are in a panic about what to do to renew their "brand." The Democrats naively think they are in great shape, even though they only have an 11 percent congressional approval rating.

The Republicans destroyed their "brand" after they gained control of Congress in 1995 by moving from limiting government spending to becoming big spenders from 2000 on. The Bush administration further damaged the "brand" by incompetently managing the aftermath of the initial war in Iraq, promoting new entitlements (the prescription drug benefit) and such bad ideas as setting up an office in the White House to promote religion (which unnecessarily antagonized those traditional religious conservatives who firmly believe in separation of church and state as well as the Republican Party's libertarian wing).

At the same time, Democrats cannot seem to get it through their heads that most Americans do not want higher taxes and more nitpicking government regulations on how to run their lives. They are confusing voter disgust with Republican mismanagement as support for their left-wing agenda.

The Republicans only need to read two new books to know what to do. The first is by the exceptionally creative political thinker and activist, Grover Norquist, titled "Leave Us Alone." The second book, by libertarian scholar and activist David Boaz, is titled "The Politics of Freedom." The authors present opposite sides of the same political coin. They are both limited-government optimists, and both spend the bulk of their time using different strategies to promote their agendas.

The Boaz book is a collection of provocative policy-oriented commentaries and essays. The Norquist book is a political roadmap for achieving what most Americans say is their political ideal.

Most Americans want a government that provides for protection of person and property from both domestic and foreign enemies, and the necessary infrastructure for a civil society.

Most Americans believe the tax burden is too heavy and that the government does not spend their tax dollars wisely and carefully. They correctly believe government engages in excessive regulation, which destroys both their liberties and economic freedoms.

Grover Norquist has built a major political coalition outside of, but informally allied with, the Republicans, which he labels as the "Leave Us Alone Coalition." He understands that different voters have different priorities and that a governing majority coalition can be assembled by putting together different groups with the understanding they would not oppose each other's agenda, provided it would not take away someone else's property or freedom. Thus, each week he brings together leaders of anti-tax, gun-owner, homeschoolers, parents' rights, small-business and many other organizations to discuss their issues and seek common support for the broad "Leave Us Alone" ideal.

Mr. Norquist argues the Democrats have put together a less cohesive and more divisive "Takings Coalition," based on the promise to take from one group and give it to another group. The "Takings Coalition" includes government workers (other than law enforcement and the military), labor unions, trial lawyers, university professors and collective utopians.

For many years, Mr. Norquist, through his Americans for Tax Reform organization, has been asking political candidates to sign a "no tax increase pledge." Candidates who have signed and abided by the pledge tended to do well. Those candidates who make such pledges and then renege (such as the first President Bush) tend to do poorly.

In the coming weeks, elected Republican officials will be meeting to decide their agenda. Fortunately for them, Mr. Norquist and Mr. Boaz (even though the latter is not a Republican) have already done the mental heavy lifting, and the Republicans merely need to adopt the good sense from their books and others.

Here are a few no-brainers for the Republicans:

(1) Again, reaffirm their pledge to continue the Bush tax rate cuts and take a "no new net tax increase" pledge.

(2) Pledge to increase spending at a lower rate than growth in gross domestic product (which they did for the first six years after regaining control of the Congress in the 1994 election) so government spending falls as a share of GDP. (It fell from 21.7 percent in 1994 to 19 percent in 2001, and the budget went into surplus.)

(3) Reduce the corporate tax rate to 25 percent to keep American companies competitive with the rest of world (the United States is tied with the highest corporate tax rate in the world).

(4) Allow more voluntary contributions to individual retirement accounts and Health Care Savings Accounts at all income levels.

(5) Greatly expand school voucher programs.

(6) Greatly expand government transparency, such as requiring every proposed bill be put on the Web in its entirety at least seven days before it is voted on so all citizens can see it.

(7) Allow citizens, associations, and business groups to challenge every regulation to see if it meets standard cost-benefit tests as a means of reducing excessive and self-serving regulation.

Every one of the above mentioned ideas has, or would have, more than majority popular support if properly explained.

As President Reagan demonstrated, Republicans win when they have a clear, sensible, and popular limited government agenda, and they lose when they become part of the Takings and liberty-reducing gang.

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