

Back to a Big-Tent GOP?

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All eyes are on Tuesday. For the GOP, the real question is Wednesday.

That's the day the party will survey the damage of the 2008 election, and have to decide what it wants to be. Even if John McCain pulls out a win, the Grand Old Party will be in trouble.

Contrary to recent liberal pronouncements, the conservative movement is not dead. But the GOP response to Tuesday will determine how long it remains on life support.

The GOP's problems are a result of a failure of action, not of philosophy. Everything, including this election, shows we remain a center-right country. If Barack Obama wins, it will be because he has doggedly (if not always believably) run to the right on everything from national security (wiretapping) to "tax cuts," guns and social issues.

Democrats may also achieve big gains in the House and Senate. But their wins in 2006 were the result of the party's decision to run "conservative" candidates -- pro-life, pro-gun and populist on economics. Democratic gains this year will come via similar candidates. The nation hasn't moved left; the Democratic Party has leaned right.

Because Nancy Pelosi and her old liberal bulls will likely overreach, the GOP will have an opportunity. But the risk is that Tuesday's results will cause panic, and exacerbate the reactionary, backward-looking behavior that has already done so much damage to the party.

Republicans love to recollect Ronald Reagan, though they forget why. Reagan's strength was looking to the future -- and framing the issues of the day for Americans. When the focus had been balanced budgets, he made the issue the need for economic growth. When the debate had been détente, Reagan turned it into the need for a strong America. That tradition continued with the Contract with America, welfare reform, government reform, tort reform. George W. Bush tackled education.

Reagan's other great strength was not distinguishing between red and blue America. He offered a set of principles, and invited anyone who broadly subscribed to those principles into his political house. The result was that unlikely coalition of fiscal conservatives, defense hawks and social conservatives. These were the days of Reagan Democrats, of victories in states that now seem unwinnable to the GOP.

The further Republicans have moved away from this playbook, the further its fortunes have declined. The GOP was thrown out in 2006 because it had failed to evolve on the new issues facing Americans -- spiraling health-care costs, dwindling energy supplies, out-of-control entitlements. It spent its last years divvying up pork. As it has hit the electoral rocks, the party has also turned inward, harping on immigrants and gay marriage.

So come Wednesday, the Democrats will be energized -- and the GOP must make a choice.

The worst GOP instinct would be to mimic Britain's Tories after their 1997 shellacking by Tony Blair, becoming a "no" party that spends so much time howling against the opposition it forgets what to howl for. It could curl up and stoke bitter cultural fights (immigration, abortion) to rev up a dwindling base. It could cede its fortunes to an unreformed old guard who will happily wait out their retirements in the minority. It would be easy to do all this; the party has already had practice.

The other option is for the GOP to start elevating the new generation of reformers -- folks like Virginia Rep. Eric Cantor or Wisconsin's Paul Ryan. With them comes a new intellectual focus on today's issues. (See Mr. Ryan's recent blueprint for reforming taxes, entitlements and health care.) The Republican high point this year was when the party united to fix the energy mess. That ought to tell it something.

The party could also go back to recruiting real professionals ahead of career politicians. That's how the Senate obtained Dr. Tom Coburn who, because he isn't a lifer, hasn't been afraid to shame colleagues on earmarks or obscene spending.

Just as important, the party could again open its arms to those who should, naturally, gravitate to the GOP. Today's ballooning Hispanic community is socially conservative, the sort of up-and-comers who would appreciate lower taxes, more opportunity. America's YouTube generation is naturally entrepreneurial, and doesn't like anyone telling them what to do. If Republicans could tap into these sentiments, they'd widen the tent.

Doing so does not involve altering conservative principles. Politicians like former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush have shown it is possible to be for law and order, even while welcoming immigrants who want the American dream; and that it's possible to be pro-life without braying on the subject in a way that offends suburban moderates.

This transformation is necessary even if Mr. McCain wins. His difficulties have stemmed from his own struggle to articulate answers to the biggest American worries.

Parties have to evolve. This is a GOP opportunity, if it is smart enough to take it.