

Remarks to Fannin County Democratic Party
November 9, 2010
by G. David Robinson

Two questions:

1. After Democrats won so convincingly, nationally, in 2008, why did we lose so convincingly in 2010?
2. Where do we go from here?

1. Why did we lose?

It has been argued that Democrats didn't win in 2008 — rather, voters just wanted to throw the Republicans out, and we were the other choice.

There aren't enough people who call themselves Democrats or Republicans to win elections. Polls consistently show that there is a third group, called variously "swing voters," "undecideds," or "independents," but probably most accurately called "persuadables." (There are further breakdowns of "Independents," many of whom don't CALL themselves Democrats or Republicans but tend to regularly vote that way.) "Persuadables" are the people who pay little or no *conscious* attention to politics until near election day, when messages that have been woven into their brains over their lifetimes, activated by specific messages aimed at them during the election campaign, persuade them to vote one way or the other.

The party that holds the White House *almost* always loses seats in Congress in the "midterm" election, halfway through the President's term.

I think that, in part, that's because no President can live up to the expectations built up in his campaign -- that THIS President will be the Messiah that will make everything OK.

But it's also because the most serious problems faced by government don't lend themselves to short-term solutions, and voters believe that those in power should have done more, sooner. That certainly is the case for 2010, when a Democratic President and a Democratic Congress actually passed some significant legislation but did NOT persuade swing voters that they had done *enough* or had done the right things.

Republicans, of course, claim that Democrats lost because "Obama and the Democrats swung too far to the left." Given that Obama has been annoyingly, frustratingly centrist (in MY opinion), it's only the Republicans' very effective noise machine that could convince anyone of that.

I believe that many persuadables (and many Democrats) just want our government to be EFFECTIVE; and when it appears NOT to be,

1. these persuadables try switching their votes to "the OTHER party," and
2. some Democrats become discouraged and just stay at home.

These persuadable voters may know little about the OTHER party (the one with an elephant as its symbol, instead of a donkey) — they just know that it's different so may produce different results. While you and I know in a *general* way the *ideological* differences between Democrats and Republicans, these swing voters "swing" because they DON'T know or at least are not consciously aware of the ideological differences. All that registers consciously is dissatisfaction.

There will be books written about the 2010 campaigns, about why some Democrats won while others lost. Those may be helpful in guiding future campaigns, but I think there's something more fundamental that we've already learned from this and previous campaigns.

2. Where do we go from here?

We know the *mechanics* of running political campaigns. We can do that as well as the Republicans do it.

We could always do *more* of the right things — canvasses, phone banks, mailers, yard signs, speaking to groups of voters — and we could do the right things more *efficiently*, maybe with better targeting of voters, but *our problem isn't the mechanics*. It's the **message**.

When a candidate says "I'm a Republican," a light bulb goes on in people's heads. "Republican" — oh, yeah, that means he believes in

1. smaller government
2. lower taxes
3. strong military
4. traditional values

The Republican candidate starts out with a *base* message that's already familiar to everyone, so he can spend the campaign acquainting the voters with *himself* — his history, his character, how he's a proud representative of those Republican values.

When a candidate says "I'm a Democrat," what's the reaction? There is no short list of values that comes to mind. If we've allowed the Republicans to define us, the words that form in the voter's brain are, *at best*, "Tax-and-spend Democrat." And worse things are said about us.

The Democratic candidate has no base message, so he **FIRST** must spend his time and money explaining what species of "Democrat" he is — what values he represents, what issues he thinks are important, how he would vote on those issues. And he must do it against the headwind of consistent Republican efforts to define all Democrats in the most negative way. Only once he has spent time and money creating a base message — for his campaign alone — can he spend more time and money telling voters about himself.

Movement

Conservatism is a **MOVEMENT**. Its supporters have a common goal and a consistent message *over time*, repeated by all of its advocates and reinforced by the conservative "message machine" — think tanks like The Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute; business organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; media like The National Review, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, The Washington Times, The Weekly Standard (William Kristol), Fox News; and all of the Republican spokespeople, Congressmen, Senators, and consultants, who constantly repeat the same talking points at every public opportunity.

Democrats or progressives seem to *start over* with each election; and with each candidate, it's "every man for himself," each defining himself as best he can. There is no consistent message; no "message machine." The best evidence of this is the public bewilderment that ensued as the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate very publicly fought among themselves over legislation.

The Republicans' base message, their four points, also is an example of what I call a "sidewalk message" — a candidate's response when a voter approaches him on the sidewalk and says "Why should I vote for you?" The

voter won't stand still for a long discourse on the candidate's entire platform. Democracy for America, in their training, says that a candidate should be able to give three points, in nine seconds, with no more than 27 words — 3-9-27. (That's a rule-of-thumb — the Republicans make four points in 10 words.) Other instances are when a newspaper or a radio interviewer needs a quote from the candidate. The short message will get voters' attention; and it's **easy to remember**.

Ultimately, as Bernie Horn put it, what we want a candidate to do is to "articulate a vision for America's future." That starts with articulating a vision that people can REMEMBER.

Framing

The base or "sidewalk" message is the beginning. Then, having defined our values, we must learn how to talk about specific issues in terms of OUR values — NOT, as Republicans do, in terms of conservative values. To enable voters to see things from our point of view, we need to understand **"framing."**

Here's Bernie Horn's try at simplifying what "framing" means:

"Humans think by integrating new information with old information already in their heads. People faced with new information are always unconsciously asking themselves, 'What is this information similar to? How does it fit into my assumptions about the world—the stereotypes, stories, truisms, and pictures I carry around in my mind.'

"Your interpretation of any picture, and your reaction to it, depends on where your attention is directed—what's in the frame, and what's outside. Focus on one part and you're reminded of one picture, story or stereotype in your head; focus on another part and you think a different thought and draw a different conclusion."

Republicans know all about "framing." Their expert, Frank Luntz, has for years been providing them with advice on how to advance their agenda and destroy ours. It's time to arm ourselves to fight back.

Proposal

- Our first objective is to develop a base message or "sidewalk" message — a concise statement of our values — on which Democratic candidates can run.
- Our second objective is to *frame* issues in terms of that message, so as to implant knowledge of *our* values firmly in the public's minds.

We have some guidance in coming up with a description of what we progressive Democrats believe.

Books

- George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004)
 - Lakoff is a linguist, and this book was his first cut at introducing laymen to ideas about conservative and progressive worldviews and how those explain the behavior of voters.
- George Lakoff, *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision* (2006)
 - This is labeled "A Progressive's Handbook," it elaborates on the material in *Don't Think of an Elephant*, and it guides the reader in putting these ideas into practice. (It's also available for FREE online, since the organization that held the copyright no longer exists.)
- Robert Creamer, *Stand Up Straight: How Progressives Can Win* (2007)
 - Creamer has incorporated Lakoff's ideas (and many others) into a 600-page book that, except for its great length, would be a comprehensive campaign manual.
- Drew Weston, *The Political Brain* (2007)
 - Weston is a psychologist at Emory University. He deals with the role of emotion in our political messaging, a role previously unacknowledged by progressives, who have insisted on an approach that could be described as "just tell 'em the facts, and they're sure to vote with us."
- George Lakoff, *The Political Mind* (2008)
 - This is a much more difficult book, since it goes in more depth into what neuroscience has found about how our brains process information and the political implications of that knowledge.

- Bernie Horn, *Framing the Future* (2008)
 - Horn has converted advice from Lakoff and Westen into his suggestion for a "sidewalk message."

It won't work to simply ask every Democrat to read these and other books and try to accomplish something individually. Instead, we need to develop training in the principles and practices described by these authors. We must organize ourselves to deliver a consistent message, using the fewer dollars available to us (compared to the Republicans) but the greater grassroots potential in the groups and organizations that make up our coalition.

Right now, we Democrats have a "party." Most of it — those of us at the county level — goes to sleep after every election and is roused in time to start campaigning for the next election. We're fully awake only for Presidential elections.

As the Republicans have done, we must become a **movement**, but one very different in character.

Once we've decided how we want to present ourselves, we must communicate who we are — what we stand for — every day, in every kind of media, at every opportunity, through every voice available to us.

Next

I'm certain there are Democrats all over the country who are having this same discussion. What we've been doing isn't working. To quote Einstein: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Let's do something different.