

GOP Explores Ways To Repitch the 'Big Tent'

After their drubbing at the polls last fall, Republicans seek strategies to regroup, rebuild, return to prominence

BY DAVID NATHER

AS JOHN MCCAIN'S top domestic and economic policy adviser during last year's presidential campaign, Douglas Holtz-Eakin got a firsthand look at the broad problems the Republican Party now faces: a shrinking base, a narrowing appeal among different demographic groups and an inability — in his view — to generate fresh ideas or effectively sell the ones it has.

In the wake of another chastening set of GOP defeats at the polls, Holtz-Eakin is now setting out to address those problems head-on. He's developing a proposal for a new think tank that he describes as a "Center for American Progress for the right" — a reference to the liberal think tank that has supplied staff and policy proposals to the Obama administration and developed new ways to market its ideas.

"I think there is now pretty widespread recognition that the Republican Party needs to become demographically broader, more welcoming of different ideas," said Holtz-Eakin, who ran the Congressional Budget Office from 2003 to 2005. "And it's time to think strategically about how to appeal more broadly outside the South."

Other GOP outreach efforts also have taken shape in recent months — notably the National Council for a New America, the group spearheaded by House Minority Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia that is planning a series of listening sessions and policy forums. But "what's not happening," Holtz-Eakin said, "is to start rethinking the basic ideas of the party."

The irony, of course, is that the Center for American Progress itself was developed as a liberal answer to the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank that has been a source of Republican policy ideas for decades. But Holtz-Eakin says established think tanks of the right, like Heritage and the American



MAN WITH A PLAN? Holtz-Eakin in the early phase of the McCain campaign.

Enterprise Institute, were "not helpful" during the McCain campaign because they weren't politically engaged or innovative in their media strategies.

That's why Holtz-Eakin says he now looks to the Center for American Progress as a model. The center, headed by former Clinton White House Chief of Staff John D. Podesta, combined a battery of domestic and foreign policy proposals with outreach innovations, such as hosting film screenings around the country and collecting e-mail addresses of people who sign up for the screenings.

Holtz-Eakin's project — still more of a concept than a fully developed proposal — is one of a scattering of initiatives starting to take shape as practical-minded Republicans look for ways to rebuild the appeal of a party seriously damaged by its losses in the last two elections. Cantor's effort has received the most publicity, but others, in various stages of development, are experimenting with longer-term growth strategies to broaden the party's appeal.

Some of these efforts are clear attempts to

duplicate the Democrats' recent successes. For example, Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California, who's in charge of recruiting Republican candidates for 2010's House races, is talking about "broadening the playing field" — much as the Democrats did in 2006 — by looking for people with unusual and diverse backgrounds and putting less emphasis on ideology.

Likewise, Ed Gillespie, a former Republican National Committee chairman who later served as counselor to President George W. Bush, has teamed up with GOP pollster Whit Ayres to form Resurgent Republic, a new firm that tests public perceptions of Republican issues and releases its surveys to the public. It's modeled on Democracy Corps, a firm founded by Democratic consultants Stan Greenberg and James Carville that conducts surveys about Democratic priorities and writes strategy memos based on the results. So far, Gillespie's firm seems to be focusing on issues that can play to Republicans' strengths; a recent survey, for example, found that most independents sided with Republicans on the need for harsh interrogation techniques.

UPDATING THE PARTY LINE

There are also conservative writers and think tank scholars who are trying to promote ways to modernize the Republican agenda. David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter, runs a Web site called NewMajority.com, which features blog posts by writers who explore the challenges facing the Republican Party and conservatism in general. And Yuval Levin, a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, writes about ways to modernize the conservative agenda by, as he describes it, "applying conservative principles to a new set of issues that conservatives haven't always been comfortable with," such as environmental and health care policy.

There's no single standout in the crowd yet, and there's no way to know which, if any, will emerge as the most successful effort. Some involve more dissent than others. Cantor, for example, doesn't try to suggest his National Council for a New America will lead to a major rethinking of the Republican agenda; it's more of an effort to sell the party's existing agenda more broadly. "It's really a conversation" about how "common-sense conservative principles" can address different groups' problems, Cantor said.

But Holtz-Eakin's think tank, if it ever gets off the ground, probably will become more of a challenge to the current Republican agenda — a forum for pragmatic policy ideas rather than a keeper of the flame of pure conservatism. "I think what we're trying to do is reclaim the center, or the center-right," said John Feehery, who was a top aide to J. Dennis Hastert when Hastert was the Speaker of the House and is working with Holtz-Eakin to develop the think tank plan. Other prominent Republicans, such as fiscal conservative Rep. Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin and former Bush White House Education Secretary Margaret Spellings are also watching Holtz-Eakin's project with interest. "I do think he's onto something," Spellings said. "What's missing are practical, reasonable, sensible ideas that sort of scratch the surface beyond the old dogmas."

It's not clear how much of an impact these efforts can have, given the scope of the GOP's problems. A Gallup poll of 7,139 adults released last week found that the Republican Party had lost support among almost every demographic group since 2001, except for frequent churchgoers.

Ultimately, these efforts can gain traction only when there's a ready audience, both at the Republican leadership level and among the base. Right now, the signs aren't promising. RNC Chairman Michael Steele dismissed the idea of a deep rethinking of the GOP agenda in a speech last week, declaring, "The era of Republican navel-gazing is over."

And former Rep. Thomas M. Davis III of Virginia doesn't think the party's base voters are interested in seeking a bigger tent. "I think the grass roots right now is in an ornery mood — 'we are who we are,'" said Davis, who's now in the Washington office of the professional services conglomerate Deloitte and is also head of the moderate Republican Main Street Partnership.

Still, the projects and conversations that are

Demographic Doldrums

A Gallup Poll released last week showed how the Republican Party during the past eight years has lost "market share" in virtually every demographic category of the American electorate.

Percent of those saying they either identify with or lean to the GOP

AGE	2001	2009	DROP (percentage points)
18 to 29	41%	32%	9
30 to 49	46	42	4
50 to 64	44	38	6
65 and older	42	41	1
ANNUAL INCOME			
Below \$30,000	37	28	9
\$30,000 to \$75,000	48	39	9
Above \$75,000	54	47	7
RACE			
White	50	44	6
Black	12	10	2
Other	23	22	1
GEOGRAPHY			
Midwest	46	37	9
East	39	33	6
West	45	40	5
South	47	43	4
IDEOLOGY			
Moderate	37	28	9
Liberal	17	9	8
Conservative	66	65	1
EDUCATION			
College graduate	47	37	10
Non-graduate	43	40	3
MARITAL STATUS			
Not married	37	29	8
Married	51	46	5
CHURCH ATTENDANCE			
Seldom or never	38	29	9
Nearly weekly/monthly	46	40	6
Weekly	52	52	0
OVERALL	44	39	5

NOTE: This year's telephone survey was of 7,139 adults between January and April. The 2001 results were from 34,945 such calls throughout the year. The margin of sampling error for both is +/- 2 percentage points.

just getting started in GOP circles could lay the groundwork for the party to be better prepared when they do have a chance to return to power, just as the Democratic Leadership Council helped create a market for centrist ideas that allowed the Democrats to broaden their appeal when the Republicans stumbled.

"It's still kind of in the shaking-out phase," said Republican strategist Kevin Madden, a veteran of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. But the significance is that, after months of private griping, Madden said, the Republicans and conservative thinkers who want to rebuild "are starting to say, 'Well, we need to stop sitting around and figure out how to do this.'"

RECLAMATION PROJECTS

The way to reclaim majority status, according to the party's pragmatists, is to apply conservative principles in innovative fashion and

develop solutions on issues that haven't been a priority for Republicans. Levin cites the Republicans' role in pushing for the 1996 welfare overhaul, which transformed policy by putting time limits on public assistance. "Welfare was not considered a conservative issue, except in the sense that most people were against it," said Levin. "But then people started thinking of more constructive ways we could look at it."

Holtz-Eakin agrees and has already developed a health care overhaul proposal that illustrates the kind of ideas his think tank would encourage. It includes a call to replace the tax break for employer-sponsored health coverage with a tax credit to discourage overuse of the system. President Obama criticized a version of that approach last year when McCain proposed it, but he might be forced to reconsider in the upcoming health care overhaul debate. Holtz-Eakin also suggests adopting a go-slower policy of steadily increasing insurance and improving the quality of health care, rather than immediately trying to cover all Americans.

But he stresses that new ideas have to develop in tandem with new outreach strategies. "We've gone a couple of generations without explaining why people use markets to solve social problems," he said. It's clear Republicans are paying special attention to how to lure young voters back to the party — an urgent concern, given that Obama won 2-to-1 among voters ages 18 to 29. McCarthy thinks the key is to find candidates who can emphasize fiscally conservative issues, which are more likely to resonate with young voters than social conservatism. "They may disagree with us on social issues, but that doesn't mean they can't be Republicans," McCarthy said. Davis concurs that party leaders need to look beyond traditional social-issue divides. "The cultural stuff is holding them back right now on expanding the base," he said.

Still, the conversations are just beginning. "I think all of these voices are helpful if they united at the end of the day," said Davis. "They're just a hodgepodge right now. I don't think any one of them will take off by themselves." It might be a long road back to power, but these Republicans are doing their best to start down that road, one step at a time. ■

FOR FURTHER READING: *Democratic Leadership Council, CQ Weekly, p. 824; GOP's future, 2008 CQ Weekly, p. 3082; Center for American Progress, p. 3133.*