

MOVING BACK TO CORE VALUES

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Conservatism has not run out of gas. It runs deep in the hearts and minds of Americans. Conservative principles have not failed; Republican leaders have failed to govern conservatively. Republicans have moved away from the core conservative principles that propelled them into office in the first place. An alarming number have abandoned the very principles that not only rallied our conservative base but also attracted independent voters to our mantel of limited government. In the public eye, the remaining conservative voices are seen as no different than those who have strayed from our roots. The resulting loss of our Republican identity prompted voters to give up on its leaders—not the beliefs. The only way for conservatism to thrive in the public policy arena is for Republican office holders to return to the core values of the party.

The war in Iraq played an irrefutable role in the outcome of the 2006 elections. There is little doubt that the barrage of negative news stories about the war took their toll. Americans began to lose sight of the purpose for our presence in Iraq and George W. Bush was unable to articulate the reasons consistently or clearly. The pub-

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lic lost faith in our Commander-In-Chief's ability to lead.

In Congress, Republicans abandoned the revolution that brought them back to power in 1994 and became the "party of government." Earmarks, deficit spending, and corruption took the place of good public policy and government reforms. Congress and the President failed on big issues such as

making the Bush tax cuts permanent, immigration reform and most important, Social Security reform.

The Republican era of lower taxes and smaller government ended in 2006 because the party's leadership walked away from those core values. We no longer had any credibility with the voters, especially the independents. The frustration among traditionally Republican voters was palpable.

The loss of the swing voters for Republican candidates had an impact on state houses throughout the country. In Wisconsin, we lost control of the Senate and lost eight seats in the Assembly, narrowing our majority to just three votes. Most estimates indicate that

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Republicans faced a drop of 5 percent to 7 percent among their traditional voters. That pressure was enough to turn many of our narrowly held Republican seats into Democrat victories.

Despite the cloud of corruption and ongoing investigations in Wisconsin's executive branch, Governor Doyle enjoyed a strong victory over Congressman Mark Green, in part, by painting Green as the emblem of all that was wrong in Washington D.C.

In many ways, the direction of Wisconsin's legislative Republicans follows the trend of the Republicans in Congress. Last session—despite having control over both houses of the legislature—we failed on major reforms like the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights, and we failed to make any significant progress in eliminating Wisconsin's structural deficit or slowing government spending. We passed a budget that spent too much and relied on massive transfers from segregated funds, leaving us with funding shortfalls in future years.

Elected Republicans nationally and here in Wisconsin have gradually moved away from fiscal conservatism. Most would prefer to define conservatism based on social issues like abortion or gay marriage rather than the pocketbook issues they run on in their districts. Obviously, the social issues are important, but they are not the only difference between Republicans and Democrats and without the fiscal conservatives on our side, Republicans cannot hang on to power.

In contrast, Ronald Reagan defined modern conservatism. Reagan's leadership and optimism appealed to the voters and united a movement of social and fiscal conservatives for a generation. For more than two decades, Reagan's conservative message kept big-government liberalism as splintered as the former Soviet Union.

In 1994, congressional leaders like Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey reinvigorated conservatism and once again made Republicans the

party of ideas and vision. The Republican Revolution swept through the state legislatures. In Wisconsin, the GOP took back the majority in the Assembly for the first time in 24 years.

During the years since the revolution, Republican governance has drifted towards the political center. Republican leadership gave in to the belief that increasing their majority or holding on to power requires preserving, expanding, and creating government programs and solutions.

At the same time, Democrats transformed their message. Following the example of Bill Clinton and the "New Democrat" movement, they began to talk about "making government more efficient" and "reducing the tax-burden on working families."

Republicans by their actions and Democrats by their words narrowed the political spectrum. This lack of polarity made the political parties virtually indistinguishable to swing voters.

The Democrats did not dominate the 2006 election cycle by proposing any big agenda for change. They offered no sweeping reforms or bold ideas. Other than their opposition to the Iraq War, Democrats offered nothing of substance to voters. Unfortunately, neither did the past several years of Republican governance.

Conservatism is still alive and well in the hearts and minds of the voters. What is needed are credible messengers and a national agenda that once again defines the political differences. Republicans must once again assert their deep commitment to lower taxes and limited government.

In Wisconsin, Republicans have a tremendous opportunity to regain public trust during the current budget cycle. We must expose the agenda of the Democrats and draw attention to the two faces of Jim Doyle; one that ran for reelection committed to holding the line on taxes, and the other that introduced a budget with \$2 billion in tax increases. Republicans

must stand firm against new taxes and big spending increases.

Nationally, our Republican presidential candidate must be one that can articulate and demonstrate the clear distinction between the parties by returning to Reagan's vision of limited government and individual responsibility.

The voters did not abandon us; we abandoned them by turning our backs on our conservative values. Republicans must regain the

trust of the people. We must rededicate our actions to match the principles upon which we all ran. We must once again become worthy of our message and the beliefs we profess to hold.