

LET'S REVISIT: WHAT'S AT STAKE...

We began this chapter by looking at the Republican struggles to take back control of the U.S. Senate, an effort that had been doomed to failure in 2010 and 2012 but finally came to fruition in 2014, and we asked what was at stake when a party ties itself to its most conservative members.

It took a while in the wake of 2010 and 2012 for the party to ask themselves that question. Some Republicans believed that it was just a matter of candidates expressing themselves badly.⁶⁵ Others, however, believed that the problems went deeper than cosmetics and went right to the ideology of the candidates themselves. We have argued in this chapter that the Republican Party has moved far to the right in recent years, and that the hyperpartisanship has meant that legislators have more trouble compromising in the national interest of getting things done. After the 2012 election, some Republicans agreed, arguing that their party had moved too far to the extremes and needed to moderate some of its positions to appeal more to women, Latino, and African American voters.

And so the party began, at least at the Senate level, to recruit quality nominees and to weed out the Tea Party candidates they felt might be popular with primary voters but would be nonstarters with state electorates, candidates like Mississippi state senator Chris McDaniel, who was trying to oust veteran Republican senator Thad Cochran, and Liz Cheney, who was trying to push aside incumbent senator Mike Enzi of Wyoming as not conservative enough. Both failed in their primary efforts to unseat long-established, non-extremist Republicans.

That those insurgent candidates did not succeed was no accident. As writers for the New York Times put it, “Republican leaders knew that if they wanted to win the Senate, they needed to crush the enemy: not Democrats, but the rebels within their own party.” Thus began a concerted effort of candidate selection, training, and donor-education in what was electable behavior and what was not. “Little was left to chance: Republican operatives sent fake campaign trackers — interns and staff members brandishing video cameras to record every utterance and move — to trail their own candidates. In media training sessions, candidates were

forced to sit through a reel of the most self-destructive moments of 2012, when Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock’s comments on rape and pregnancy helped sink the party.”⁶⁶

And in the long run, it paid off. Tea Party challenges to establishment candidates lost, good candidates were recruited, and they avoided making the kinds of gaffes that play endlessly on the media loop before an election. And in the end, Senator McConnell was able to claim the mantle he’d wanted for six years.

Whether the Republican’s have solved their extremism problem is not yet clear. There are still flamethrowers in the House and at least three Senators with Tea Party backgrounds and 2016 presidential aspirations who can make McConnell’s life a majority leader difficult.

Further, not all Republicans diagnose their electoral problems the same way. Former South Carolina Republican Senator Jim DeMint, the Tea Party stalwart who said that he would rather have “thirty Republicans in the Senate who believe in principles of freedom than sixty who don’t believe in anything,”⁶⁷ decided to resign his Senate seat in 2012 to take on the leadership of a conservative think tank called the Heritage Foundation, saying, “I’m leaving the Senate now, but I’m not leaving the fight. . . . I’ve decided to join the Heritage Foundation at a time when the conservative movement needs strong leadership in the battle of ideas.”⁶⁸

The Republican experience of the last three election cycles suggests that what is at stake when a party is captive to its more extreme members is that it puts itself outside the comfort zone of most mainstream Americans, who remain much closer to the middle ideologically. The party may win elections that take place in ideologically homogeneous congressional districts, but when you move to the state or national level, it’s harder to sell those more extreme ideas to moderate voters. But for the ideological purists such as DeMint, a larger cause is at stake. In the present case, what is at stake is no less than a struggle to define the soul of the Republican Party. Stay tuned as the party continues to work it out.