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After the Election, the Republican Party Faces a "Social Cliff"

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Back in November 2010, after Republicans decisively overturned the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, President Obama admitted his party had taken a “shellacking” in the midterm elections.

Now it is the turn of the Republicans. Despite retaining the House, and the closeness of the popular vote in the Presidential contest, they got a shellacking as significant, perhaps more so, as that handed out two years ago. Many voters signalled not only that they were far from satisfied with the proposed alternative to President Obama's approach to the economy; they rebuked the GOP's conservative stance on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. A growing and determined majority of young and female Americans put the Republicans beyond the acceptable, causing ethnic minority groups --- who may have been decisive in the Obama victory --- to move further away from the GOP.

So the question in these days after the election: will Republicans recognise that a majority of Americans may not be interested in using the Bible as guidebook for legislating the lives of private citizens? Can they accept that the same majority no longer see the US as the protected reserve of the descendants of the nation's "white" founders?

The civil war on social issues that will be waged within the Republican Party over the next few months and years will bleed over into the economic choices facing GOP politicians in Washington. Mitt Romney's defeat means that his party can only adhere to its strict conservative message of tax cuts and decreased federal government spending if it gives way on hard-line social positions. The Republicans will have to abandon a commitment to the Defense of Marriage Act, stop the quest to overturn Roe v Wade, and end resistance to the DREAM Act. Playing hardball on both fiscal and social issues is no longer an option if the GOP wants to present a viable candidate in the next Presidential elections, and indeed in some Congressional contests in 2014.

Pragmatism is not a word often associated with the conservative wing of the Republicans Party. However, if they do recognise that the authoritarian approach is unlikely to triumph --- Rick Santorum, for example, would have lost this election by a much wider margin than Romney --- then they could widen their appeal as the standard bearers for fiscal conservatism. Take immigration, abortion, and gay marriage off the table, and young, female, and ethnic voters will be willing to listen again.

There could be a lesson for American conservatives from Britain as the US supposedly heads towards a "fiscal cliff”. The Conservative Party here has launched a root-and-branch assault on the welfare state in the name of debt reduction. The nation is largely tolerating that upheaval because the Government is avoiding any imposition of a conservative social vision, which would be rejected by a majority of the population.

A proposed strategy for the Republicans: allow the DREAM Act to pass as the first priority of the lame-duck session, ideally before President Obama pressures Congress to move. Disavow the Defense of Marriage Act. Stop adding amendments de-funding Planned Parenthood to legislation. Then the GOP might have the strength on their principle of no new tax raises to raise revenue, focusing instead on cuts in government spending and on entitlement reform as the means to reduce the deficit.

That may be a daunting challenge for the conservative wing, but if Speaker of the House John Boehner and Senator Minority Leader Mitch McConnell cannot persuade their colleagues to accept the new reality of American politics, then the GOP will face defeat long before the next election. Moderate Republican legislators --- recognising that it is not “angry white men” but those in a growing socially-liberal coalition who cast the key votes --- will not just break away on the social front. They will also be amenable to working with President Obama on his economic programme, including tax increases and an easing of some of the drastic reductions in Government spending.

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