A Practical Plan for Recalibrating Conservatism

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By Peter Berkowitz - June 9, 2014

Recent public opinion polls and President Obama's serial stumbling the last few weeks are making Republicans increasingly hopeful and Democrats increasingly apprehensive that the November midterm elections will leave the GOP in control of both houses of Congress. Yet many Republicans remain worried about 2016 while Democrats express optimism about their party's chances of retaining the White House.

The disparity in expectations is embodied in the person of Hillary Rodham Clinton, a prohibitive frontrunner and a historic candidate. The Republican presidential field, by contrast, doesn't even have a clear favorite.

The reason the two parties view the two elections so differently is that a highly energized base and a disgruntled center may be enough this autumn to swing key Senate elections in favor of fresh Republican faces—but these factors alone cannot be counted on to generate a national majority in 2016. To retake the White House, conservatives will have to do more than stand against Obama's track record of government expansion. They will have to go beyond exposing the deleterious consequences of his rudderless foreign policy. Conservatives will also need to say what they are *for* and articulate concrete policies to achieve their goals.

Because we live in a progressive age, it's easier for American conservatives to focus their best energies on saying no to more and more government. The natural tendency of big, centralized government to grow bigger and more centralized has been amply demonstrated by the federal government's post-New Deal trajectory. Rising income equality and declining social mobility notwithstanding, popular culture and shared norms for generations have been steadily trending more egalitarian and more permissive. Conservatives rightly regard these tendencies as major threats to individual liberty and equality under law. And they properly make resisting them a priority.

Yet as Edmund Burke observed in "Reflections on the Revolution in France," a complete statesman must possess not merely "a disposition to preserve" but also "an ability to improve." Never has that counsel been more appropriate. The American people have developed expectations—by now deeply rooted and widely shared—that the federal government must provide a social safety net and regulate the economy.

That conservatives will generally seek a more modest social safety net and more restrained regulation than progressives does not relieve conservatives of the responsibility to devise measures to ensure a social safety net as well as economic regulations that are, consistent with conservatism's principles, effective and affordable. Indeed, since conservatives are

bucking the temper of the times, it will be necessary for them, especially if they wish to win national elections, to craft policies with greater care and to support them with more compelling evidence and arguments.

The authors of the new e-book, "Room to Grow: Conservative Reforms for a Limited Government and a Thriving Middle Class," have risen to the occasion. Published by the YG Network (YG stands for young guns), their short volume comprises a collection of essays by prominent conservative thinkers responding in particular to "the worries and anxieties" of middle-class Americans—those who work for a living and regard themselves as neither rich nor poor but who can imagine themselves as becoming either—by articulating a "concrete conservative governing agenda."

The "Room to Grow" authors reject the frequent but facile distinction between a politics of principle and a politics of pragmatism. Instead, they translate fundamental conservative principles into practical policies across a range of issues. Their proposals share a commitment to protecting individual liberty, keeping the federal government within constitutional limits, encouraging the states to experiment and innovate, taking advantage of market forces, and respecting civil society—including families, religious faith, and civic associations of all sorts.

Ethics and Public Policy Center Senior Fellow Peter Wehner stresses in the volume's opening essay that makers of conservative public policy must grasp the pervasive sense of economic insecurity felt by middle-class Americans. The cost of living is rising and the cost of higher education has skyrocketed; wages are stagnating while men and women are working longer hours; an opaque and expensive system of health insurance has been made more opaque and expensive by the 2010 Affordable Care Act; unemployment has come down since the Great Recession officially ended in June 2009 but it remains distressingly high; and economic growth lags. A substantial majority of the public puts primary blame for these grim realities on the federal government, and puts decidedly more blame on Congress than on the executive branch or the judiciary.

Conservatives rightly take inspiration from the achievements of Ronald Reagan, but our realities are not identical to those to which conservative public policy, under President Reagan's leadership, responded to successfully in the 1980s. "Conservatives need to show Americans," Wehner urges, "how the principles that led to successful solutions when applied to the problems of that era can do the same when applied to the rather different problems of this one."

Taking the American people as they are, the proposals put forward by Wehner's colleagues seek to lift burdens on individuals and remove constraints on civil society in a variety of areas including taxation, K-12 education, higher education, social safety net provision, employment, energy, financial regulation, labor and fiscal policy, and the family.

Health care policy expert James Capretta's alternative to the Affordable Care Act, for example, embraces popular national goals of Obamacare—ensuring that those with pre-existing conditions will be able to keep or obtain insurance, establishing wide access, and containing costs—but seeks to achieve them with conservative means. Capretta's proposal would substantially expand consumer choice; provide tax credits to households that lack access to employer-provided insurance; furnish continuous-coverage protection for those who, having developed a condition while on one plan, are forced by employment circumstances to change to another; and leave maximum room for states to experiment consistent with the minimum requirements for uniform national policies.

In the concluding chapter, Bloomberg columnist and National Review senior editor Ramesh Ponnuru welcomes "the constitutionalist turn in conservative politics" taken by the Tea Party movement while offering sober advice on how to respect the fundamentals of the American constitutional tradition. To be true to the Constitution, he observes, a constitutional conservatism should be primarily political and not legal. It should rely less on courts and more on conscientious legislators and engaged citizens who hold their representatives accountable. Their common aim should be to protect liberty and promote the general welfare by fashioning a federal government that "serves rather than masters" individuals and civil society.

The new interest in reform among leading conservative thinkers has attracted doubts from both sides. On the left, Washington Post columnist E.J Dionne weighed in at The Atlanticand Brookings senior fellow William Galston took up the matter in a Wall Street Journal column; both implicitly chide the reformers for failing to adopt a more progressive spirit and express skepticism that the reformers will find enthusiasm among rank-and-file conservatives. On the right, Paul Mirengoff at the influential Powerline blog worries that the reformers may lead conservatism astray by embracing too much of the progressive spirit.

The particular balance that the reform conservatives have struck between conserving and improving is undoubtedly open to debate. What is less debatable is the importance to American conservatism—for the midterm elections, the 2016 presidential election, and beyond—of recalibrating the balance, and the importance of the new reformers to encouraging a thoughtful recalibration.

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.