

# A Moderate Game Plan for the GOP

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Donald Trump's candidacy has ignited a civil war within the Republican Party and the larger conservative movement. The struggle not only pits the grassroots against the so-called establishment, but has spurred members of the establishment to take pot shots at one another. These intra-party and intra-movement hostilities obscure the complex composition of any conceivable victorious GOP coalition. They also blur the constellation of conservative principles that makes winning the presidency worthwhile.

Because its base is divided into several voting blocs, the GOP can only win as a big tent party. No part of the Republican base comes close to encompassing a majority of Americans. This also goes for the clusters of voters currently vying for control of the party: those in the heartland, angry about economic stagnation and illegal immigration; and the coastal and urban elites determined to limit government by cutting taxes and reducing regulation. Add these competing groups together and you still don't get a majority of Americans.

To win a national election, a Republican presidential ticket must also hold on to the party's moderates—those who are drawn to the standard conservative message of less government, but who are not anti-government and who appreciate their government benefits. These voters incline to traditional morality but dislike preachy politicians eager to impose morals through law.

Finally, taking back the White House means attracting enough independent-minded, unaffiliated voters. That imperative does not flow from some abstract obligation to respect consensus. It's grounded in arithmetic. Even if the GOP nominee were to win every single vote of every single registered Republican, he or she would fall short of the necessary 270 Electoral College votes.

Winning, especially in the age of Trump, is not everything. Many movement conservatives believe that electing a Republican president who did not stand for conservative principles would represent a Pyrrhic victory. The principles in question are individual liberty and individual responsibility, limited and effective government, free markets and a growing economy, thriving families, a vigorous civil society, and a diplomatically and militarily strong America capable of advancing the nation's interests abroad.

But as the July Republican convention in Cleveland approaches, it's fair to wonder whether the GOP will field a nominee capable of translating those principles into policies that address the concerns of a majority of voters.

In “Going Red: The Two Million Voters Who Will Elect the Next President—and How Conservatives Can Win Them,” Ed Morrissey presents the results of his visits to seven swing counties in seven swing states to listen to voters, learn what moves them, and ascertain what they seek in a presidential candidate. In 2004, George W. Bush won Hillsborough County Fla.; Hamilton County, Ohio; Wake County, N.C.; Prince William County, Va.; Brown County, Wis.; Jefferson County, Colo.; and Hillsborough County, N.H. In 2008 and again in 2012, Barack Obama won them. If Republicans get their act together, Morrissey argues, they could retake these bellwether communities in 2016 and, with them, the presidency.

It’s a big if. Morrissey’s main findings are compelling, though they will not surprise those familiar with polling data or acquainted with the America that lies beyond large urban centers and the first ring of big-city suburbs. To get their act together, Republicans must, consistent with their principles, moderate their message.

Changing demographics in the country as a whole and in the seven battleground counties in particular means that Republicans need to do better among groups—African-Americans, Latinos, women, and the young—that voted somewhere between decisively and overwhelmingly for Obama. Even small improvements could provide the margin of victory. Take, for example, African-Americans: “The difference between single digits and double digits in this nearly monolithic bloc of Democratic voters,” writes Morrissey, “would change election outcomes.”

Fortunately for Republicans, the qualities that voters in all seven battleground counties seek in their next president are consistent with the party’s interest in expanding its appeal to minorities, women, and the young.

First, according to Morrissey, battleground-county voters “want a principled but pragmatic approach to governance.” They are hungry for problem solvers rather than ideologues. Swing voters are especially anxious about economic problems; they want their candidates to expand opportunity and enhance upward mobility by creating a climate favorable to starting and growing businesses. These voters’ economic opinions are rooted in non-economic values: They support lower taxes, less regulation, and freer markets in the belief that these policies will best enable them to provide for their families.

Second, “optimism wins out” for wavering Republicans and for voters capable of pulling the lever for either party. “Fed up with the direction of the nation in nearly every policy area” but tired of vitriolic attacks on the other side, these voters are eager to support a “positive agenda.”

Their sort of candidate would recognize voters’ anxieties about immigration, but would refrain from harsh anti-immigrant denunciations and instead would advocate lawful immigration. Such a candidate would show appreciation for the libertarian streak in the

country by stressing that the federal government should avoid contentious social issues while respecting the spirit of the federalism inscribed in the nation's constitutional structure by emphasizing that such issues are best left to the states to resolve.

Finally, reports Morrissey, in the battleground counties “voters want to know that the candidate understands them and has empathy for their concerns.”

To obtain their votes, the GOP will have to greatly improve its ground game. But this goes beyond catching up with the Obama camp's expertise in collecting block-by-block and house-by-house voter data to micro-target potential supporters. It requires candidates to go into the community to meet voters, listen to citizens' hopes and fears, and fashion policies that will bring opportunity and prosperity to middle-class men and women who have not fully shared in the nation's economic recovery.

What is striking about the measured exploration of the moderation of America's swing voters in “Going Red” is its source. A longtime radio talk show host and pioneer in the conservative blogosphere, Ed Morrissey launched Captains' Quarters in 2003 and, in 2008, moved to HotAir.com where he has continued his incisive opining and rich reporting. Morrissey is a committed conservative well versed in the fundamentals of limited government and attentive to the claims of traditional morality.

His book is a hopeful sign that amid the tumult of this particularly perplexing election year, influential conservative media figures at home in the grassroots appreciate that the defense of conservative principles depends on the exercise, and respect for the exercise, of moderation.

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