

A Party Inverted

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Five months after the presidential election Democrats are still pointing fingers at one another and trying to figure out why Republicans won. Was the problem the party's position on social issues or taxes or defense or what? Were there tactical errors made in the conduct of the campaign? Were the right advisers heard? Was the candidate flawed?

Before deciding what Democrats should do now, it's important to see what Republicans have done right over many years. When the Goldwater Republicans lost in 1964, they didn't try to become Democrats. They tried to figure out how to make their own ideas more appealing to the voters. As part of this effort, they turned to Lewis Powell, then a corporate lawyer and soon to become a member of the United States Supreme Court. In 1971 he wrote a landmark memo for the United States Chamber of Commerce in which he advocated a sweeping, coordinated and long-term effort to spread conservative ideas on college campuses, in academic journals and in the news media.

To further the party's ideological and political goals, Republicans in the 1970's and 1980's built a comprehensive structure based on Powell's blueprint. Visualize that structure as a pyramid. You've probably heard some of this before, but let me run through it again. Big individual donors and large foundations - the Scaife family and Olin foundations, for instance - form the base of the pyramid. They finance conservative research centers like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, entities that make up the second level of the pyramid.

The ideas these organizations develop are then pushed up to the third level of the pyramid - the political level. There, strategists like Karl Rove or Ralph Reed or Ken Mehlman take these new ideas and, through polling, focus groups and careful attention to Democratic attacks, convert them into language that will appeal to the broadest electorate. That language is sometimes in the form of an assault on Democrats and at other times in the form of advocacy for a new policy position. The development process can take years. And then there's the fourth level of the pyramid: the partisan news media. Conservative commentators and networks spread these finely honed ideas.

At the very top of the pyramid you'll find the president. Because the pyramid is stable, all you have to do is put a different top on it and it works fine.

It is not quite the "right wing conspiracy" that Hillary Clinton described, but it is an impressive organization built consciously, carefully and single-mindedly. The Ann Coulters and Grover Norquists don't want to be candidates for anything or cabinet officers for anyone. They know their roles and execute them because they're paid well and believe, I think, in what they're saying. True, there's lots of money involved, but the money makes a difference because it goes toward reinforcing a structure that is already stable.

To understand how the Democratic Party works, invert the pyramid. Imagine a pyramid balancing precariously on its point, which is the presidential candidate.

Democrats who run for president have to build their own pyramids all by themselves. There is no coherent, larger structure that they can rely on. Unlike Republicans, they don't simply have to assemble a campaign apparatus - they have to formulate ideas and a vision, too. Many Democratic fundraisers join a campaign only after assessing how well it has done in assembling its pyramid of political, media and idea people.

There is no clearly identifiable funding base for Democratic policy organizations, and in the frantic campaign rush there is no time for patient, long-term development of new ideas or of new ways to sell old ideas. Campaigns don't start thinking about a Democratic brand until halfway through the election year, by which time winning the daily news cycle takes precedence over building a consistent message. The closest that Democrats get to a brand is a catchy slogan.

Democrats choose this approach, I believe, because we are still hypnotized by Jack Kennedy, and the promise of a charismatic leader who can change America by the strength and style of his personality. The trouble is that every four years the party splits and rallies around several different individuals at once. Opponents in the primaries then exaggerate their differences and leave the public confused about what Democrats believe.

In such a system tactics trump strategy. Candidates don't risk talking about big ideas because the ideas have never been sufficiently tested. Instead they usually wind up arguing about minor issues and express few deep convictions. In the worst case, they embrace "Republican lite" platforms - never realizing that in doing so they're allowing the Republicans to define the terms of the debate.

A party based on charisma has no long-term impact. Think of our last charismatic leader, Bill Clinton. He was president for eight years. He was the first Democrat to be re-elected since Franklin Roosevelt. He was smart, skilled and possessed great energy. But what happened? At the end of his tenure in the most powerful office in the world, there were fewer Democratic governors, fewer Democratic senators, members of Congress and state legislators and a national party that was deep in debt. The president did well. The party did not. Charisma didn't translate into structure.

If Democrats are serious about preparing for the next election or the next election after that, some influential Democrats will have to resist entrusting their dreams to individual candidates and instead make a commitment to build a stable pyramid from the base up. It will take at least a decade's commitment, and it won't come cheap. But there really is no other choice.

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