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Friday, May 07, 2010

ELECTION 2010

Lessons of tea-party failures

Exclusive: Gerard Valentino looks at results of primary races, options in November

Posted: May 08, 2010
1:00 am Eastern

The establishment media are making a lot of noise about the ineffectual results garnered by the tea-party candidates in the Ohio and Indiana Republican primary elections. Admittedly, the poor showing at the ballot box is a blow to the tea-party movement.

By simply looking at vote totals, it is easy to paint the tea-party group as a failed political movement. However, looking at things in that way misses the point.

After all, an inexperienced political movement took on one of the most powerful political machines in the world – the Republican Party.

In Ohio, for example, the state level Republican Party has incredibly deep pockets, unrivaled political minds and an entrenched power base. Ohio Republican Party Chairman Kevin DeWine used all of those vast resources to squash the rebellious tea-party coalition. Expecting a neophyte political movement to compete with such a sophisticated political organization is unrealistic.

Frankly, under those circumstances, the tea-party coalition never had a chance.

[The best tea-party signs ever -- compiled in a striking book with foreword by Chuck Norris: "Don't Tread on US! Signs of a 21st Century Political Awakening"](#)

There are no moral victories in politics, however, and the fact remains that the tea-party movement nationwide lost big due to the failures in Ohio and Indiana. The only bright spot is that tea-party candidates fought with such passion that it scared the establishment into action.

Despite a public display of confidence, the fact remains that on an even playing field the tea-party candidates would easily beat the establishment Republican candidates. Polls statewide in Ohio showed that when voters understood both candidates' stance on the issues, the tea-party candidates were nearly always chosen. The problem is without enough money and political machinery, the tea-party candidates couldn't disseminate their message.

Despite their zeal, tea-party candidates lacked the money, political machinery and political sophistication that is vital in today's world, and in politics only winning matters. That leaves the tea-party leaders in a position of weakness. If they accept the well-defined problems inherent in their coalition, they can remain viable by remaining defiant. But if they allow the establishment Republican leaders to bully them into line for the general elections, it will marginalize them further.

Some will argue the mere fact that establishment Republicans felt a need to pull out all the stops to defeat tea-party candidates sends an undeniable message. But since only winning matters in politics, any possible message is lost in the shuffle. Political operatives only understand results, and the tea-party movement failed to deliver.

Unfortunately for the tea-party movement, they failed on a big stage when the entire political world was watching. Establishment Republican campaigns across the country are already shifting their resources in response to the lack of effect the tea-party movement had on the outcomes in Ohio and Indiana. If in the process tea-party supporters are pulled under the establishment Republican tent, it will make them a very small part of a much bigger coalition.

(Column continues below)

Only by continuing to be a thorn in the side of traditional Republicans can the tea party remain viable and rebuild on the foundation built over the last year. In contrast, the job of establishment Republican leadership is to rebuild the relationship between the tea-party crowd and traditional Republicans.

It will take a great deal of political skill to bring tea-party supporters back into the fold considering the bitterness many feel at being mistreated by established Republican leaders. It is possible the tactics used by both sides might have left the relationship between tea-party supporters and the Republican Party permanently broken.

Winning primary elections against an inexperienced tea-party crowd was easy for establishment Republicans, but they will need a unified party to beat the Democrats. Putting the pieces of the party back together is key to winning back control of Congress as well, and you can bet Republican leaders will call on all their resources to repair the damage.

For the tea-party movement, it is decision time. Supporters have to decide if they will put aside their differences and support the Republicans, or stay true to their ideals.

Their decision may have huge ramifications for the Republican Party in November, and that might bring the established leadership to the table. Such an outcome might be the best the tea-party movement could have expected in the first place.

Gerard Valentino is a co-founder of the [Buckeye Firearms Association](#) and author of "The Valentino Chronicles, Observations of a Middle Class Conservative," available at [Amazon.com](#).