

GOP needs right messenger for 2016

By **Jeffrey Sikkenga**

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In 2016, the Republican Party will face a strange situation. Democrats will have an obvious nominee for president (Hillary Clinton), but Republicans won't. It'll be the first time in 16 years.



Sure, there are a lot of interesting personalities out there: Paul Ryan, Chris Christie, Marco Rubio, Mitch Daniels, Bobby Jindal, Nikki Haley and Susanne Martinez, among others. But before focusing on individuals, the Republicans need to step back and look at the lessons of 2012 for the kind of person they should — and should not — nominate.

• **Don't Nominate a Rich White Guy**

The rap on Republicans is that they are the party of rich, white men. It's not true: Conservative principles appeal across lines of gender, race and income. But with each new election the party nominates a candidate who is less able to communicate those principles because he looks less and less like the emerging America.

In a democracy, people don't just vote on principle; they need to like the candidate and feel a personal connection, which is a lot easier if he or she looks, talks and *lives* like you.

In America, it's OK to be rich, but not to be an out-of-touch rich guy. Mitt Romney is a fundamentally decent human being, but the Democrats effectively portrayed him as "not one of us" because, to some extent, he isn't. To see that, just think of Ronald Reagan: He would never have said the infamous "47%" remark because he would never have thought that about ordinary Americans, even for a moment.

• **But Do Nominate a Real Conservative**

The Republicans are the conservative party, and they should not change their attachment to individual liberty, personal responsibility and limited constitutional government. They should nominate a real conservative — someone who has conservative ideas in their bones and has experience putting them into practice in areas like education, health care and taxes. Romney came late to conservatism (if he ever really got there), and he could not talk about conservative ideas with the confidence and detail that can seal the deal, especially with the growing number of independent

voters.

The next candidate must be someone who has successfully translated conservative ideas into policy, and can tell moving stories about people helped by the reforms. It was shocking that in Ohio, the Romney campaign never ran an ad featuring regular people who had jobs because of the companies that Bain Capital saved or created.

• **One Who Sounds Reasonable on Social Issues**

America is going in different directions on the hot button social issues of the day. On gay marriage and legalizing marijuana, for example, the country is rapidly becoming more liberal, especially among young people. On abortion, it is slowly but surely becoming more conservative, including among those under 30.

The GOP needs a nominee who can navigate that complexity without abandoning conservative principles. He or she needs to put forward the pro-life position in a way that sounds reasonable to most Americans, who don't like abortion but don't want it outlawed in every situation. The nominee (and the party) also has to be willing to defer to state and local governments on marriage and drugs, a position totally compatible with federalism and one that seems sensible to a lot of people.

Given the weak economy, exploding debt and the unpopularity of Obamacare, the Republicans should have won this election. Instead, they lost the presidency, two Senate seats and seven congressional districts. In almost every close race, ineffective nominees sealed the party's fate. To win back the White House in 2016, the GOP will need the right message *and* the right person to carry it.

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