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Don't Lose Like Me

By Joe Schwarz

Sunday, September 17, 2006; B05

I am the political equivalent of a woolly mammoth, a rarity heading for extinction. Yes, I'm a moderate.

Our plight today is dire. Even though more than half of all American voters consider themselves centrists, the Republican and Democratic parties are finding themselves controlled to an ever-greater extent by their more extreme elements. On the Republican side, the "religious right," the quasi-theocrats, are infiltrating the party power structure quite effectively. On the left, the moneyed Eastern establishment and California liberals shrilly tell Americans that the sky is falling, that the world hates us and that Republican policies are all wrong. Yet they offer no viable alternatives. As a result, they have managed to alienate much of the traditional working-class Democratic base, good people caught between Republicans they don't like and Democrats who have abandoned them. What's a moderate to do?

In my case, lose an election.

It wasn't President Bush who proved to be the kiss of death to my candidacy for a second term in the House. The president's poll numbers may not be very good in many places, but he's still well-liked in my neck of the woods -- south-central Michigan. So when I geared up to run again this year, I was pleased to have his endorsement. My loss had nothing to do with his popularity, or national issues such as the war in Iraq. What did me in was voter apathy, and moral absolutist groups supported by a vitriolic negative-ad campaign funded by organizations on the far right.

Michigan's 7th Congressional District borders on Indiana and Ohio, extending west to Battle Creek, east to Ann Arbor and north to Lansing. It's a real slice of Middle America. I was born and raised in Battle Creek. I've practiced medicine there for 32 years. My dad was a physician there, too. I was educated at the University of Michigan, and I'm chairman of the board of the alumni association of that great university. I bleed Maize and Blue. If ever there was a local, I'm it.

After 16 years in the Michigan Senate and service as mayor of Battle Creek, I was elected to Congress in 2004. But my moderate positions on *Roe v. Wade* (I do not support overturning it, believing that a woman has the right to choose) and embryonic stem cell research (I strongly support it), as well as my general feeling that religion and moral and ethical issues are private matters, did not sit well with those who would mix church and state in a way that is antithetical to the principles of separation on which our country was founded -- in other words, the hard right.

So in the Republican primary, the opposition got its vote out. The effort was funded, probably to the tune of \$1 million or so, by the Club for Growth, a Washington outfit supported by plutocrats nationwide who apparently have nothing better to do with their money than give it to an organization that stands for nothing -- though it says it's "anti-tax" -- and likes to play in elections in which it has no logical interest.

I had a great campaign organization, willing volunteers and was well-funded. Key endorsements rolled in: from the Farm Bureau, police and fire organizations, teachers, medical groups, some unions, key GOP officeholders. My supporters thought I couldn't lose -- and as a result, I did. It was a classic example of a

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motivated minority -- just 7.8 percent of the Republican electorate districtwide -- nominating a congressional candidate. The moderates stayed home in droves, felt horrible the next day, and vowed never to miss another vote. They will. The hard right won't. And fewer and fewer sensible "let's take the broad view" candidates will have any chance of being elected.

But politics needs a middle. Communication across the aisle in Congress and in legislatures is the sine qua non of effective public policy formulation. The reluctance -- at times, the near-total unwillingness -- to consider the other side's position has hamstrung political bodies from coast to coast.

Moderates aren't organized, and because they straddle party lines, they may never be much of a cohesive group with the ability to move a policy agenda. But they must begin fighting back -- rationally always, gloves off if necessary. Congratulations to Sen. Lincoln D. Chafee, a moderate Republican from Rhode Island, for his primary victory last week. He did fight back, and effectively.

Somehow, some way, moderates must understand that they will go the way of the moa, the dodo and, appropriately, the woolly mammoth unless they learn to fight as hard for the policies of the sane and rational center as the far right and far left fight for the extremes.

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