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What's next for religious conservatives?

David Gibson Religion News Service | Nov. 7, 2012

Mitt Romney failed in his bid to win the White House back for Republicans, but the biggest losers in Tuesday's voting may be Christian conservatives who put everything they had into denying President Barack Obama a second term and battling other threats to their agenda.

Instead of the promised victories, the religious right encountered defeat at almost every turn. Not only did Obama win convincingly, but Democrats held onto the Senate -- and the power to confirm judges -- and Wisconsin elected the nation's first openly gay senator, Tammy Baldwin.

Meanwhile, Republican senate candidates Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock went down to unanticipated defeat in large part because of their strongly anti-abortion views, and an effort in Florida to restrict abortion failed. For the first time ever, same-sex marriage proponents won on ballots in four out of four states, while marijuana for recreational use was legalized in two out of three states where the question was on the ballot.

Even Michele Bachmann, an icon among Christian conservatives, barely held onto her House seat in Minnesota while tea party favorite Allen West lost his congressional district in Florida.

"Evangelical Christians must see the 2012 election as a catastrophe for crucial moral concerns," R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote in a sobering post-mortem.

"DISASTER," David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network wrote on his blog. He then amended his lament to read: "COLOSSAL DISASTER."

Yet as bad as the results were for social conservatives, they may now face an equally difficult fight as they try to defend their agenda. Sifting through the electoral rubble, some conservatives and GOP leaders argue that the party's positions and presentation on issues like gay marriage and abortion rights turn off more voters than they attract.

This internal battle is in many respects the natural aftermath of a painful political loss, and Republicans are already involved in a process of soul-searching -- and back-biting -- that will likely continue for some time as the GOP tries to figure out how it can find a winning formula.

But this time around, more than in previous election cycles, Christian conservatives are a particularly large target, and they are feeling especially exposed to criticism.

Even before the votes were counted, for example, Romney's shift to the center -- he studiously downplayed social issues like gay rights and abortion in the last month of the campaign -- coincided with a surge in the polls and bolstered arguments that the party should soft-pedal traditional sexual morality in order to win elections and promote economic conservatism.

As Jennifer Rubin, a conservative columnist who backed Romney, wrote Wednesday in *The Washington Post*,

"the issue of gay marriage is a generational one, a battle that social conservatives have lost ... The American people have changed their minds on the issue and fighting this one is political flat-earthism."

Christian conservatives are not about to accept that view, however, and in the hours after Romney's defeat they seemed to take two main tacks in rebuttal.

One was to double-down on their agenda by pinning the blame on Romney and his campaign for not stressing social issues much more forcefully.

"Mitt Romney is a good man, but let's just be honest -- we Republicans nominated the most liberal Republican nominee in history," said Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican who joined a Wednesday morning webcast with Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council.

Jordan said doubts about Romney's convictions as well as his campaign's modulation near the end disappointed values voters and doomed the ticket.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, head of the Susan B. Anthony List, a leading anti-abortion lobby, agreed.

"What was presented as discipline by the Romney campaign by staying on one message -- the economy -- was a strategic error that resulted in a winning margin of pro-life votes being left on the table," Dannenfelser said. "Victory was handed to the opponent."

The other tack that emerged, however, was to concede that Christian conservatives may need to change the tone if not the substance of their message in order to appeal to voters who are increasingly non-male, non-white and even non-Christian. The electorate today is increasingly Latino and younger, and both those groups are turned off by anything that smacks of righteous moralizing.

"No party can win if it is seen as heartless," Mohler said. "No party can win if it appeals only to white and older Americans. No party can win if it looks more like the way to the past than the way to the future."

Indeed, exit polls indicated that evangelicals turned out more strongly for Romney (or against Obama) than they had for any other Republican in history -- but that almost 80 percent margin was still not enough in raw numbers to put the GOP ticket over the top.

"My message really today is we have more work to do to become more diverse, but the party has to start building bridges and practicing the politics of addition to bring more people in," Ralph Reed, head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, said at a morning-after briefing in Washington.

"My corollary message," he added, "is there is no inherent conflict between those folks coming in and us. In most cases there's a great deal of commonality."

But in the wake of Tuesday's defeat, that's a message that Christian conservatives are going to have to sell to the Republican Party itself before they can make it to the general public.

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