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The GOP's Moment of Truth

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Sometime today, maybe tomorrow, the fate of the Republican Party will be decided. GOP House leaders met with President Obama yesterday for negotiations to extend the debt ceiling and, hopefully, end the government shutdown. The President?s protestations that he would not negotiate notwithstanding, the meeting was a negotiation. It was not a White House tour. The tours are cancelled because of the shutdown.

The other big news yesterday that will force Speaker John Boehner to decide the fate of the GOP came from the NBC/WSJ poll [1]. By a 22 point margin, 53% to 31 %, voters blame the Republicans not the Democrats for the shutdown. More problematic for the GOP?s future, only 24 percent of the electorate holds a favorable view of the Republican Party, while Obama?s job approval rating ticked up a couple of points to 47 percent. When less than a quarter of the electorate likes you, you are in deep trouble.

That trouble is also Speaker Boehner?s opportunity. The drop in the polls is not so much a verdict on the GOP?s ideological leanings, although it is interesting that the NBC/WSJ poll showed an increase in the number of people who support the Affordable Care Act. No, the sinking poll numbers for the GOP is a verdict on the role of ideology in politics, a no confidence vote as it were in the proposition that if the GOP sticks to its principles at all costs, they will win. That strategy failed to take account of the fact that it had no prospect of winning and could only produce government dysfunction. Americans? traditional pragmatism rejects highly ideological politics, especially when it results in a shutdown with many unhappy effects that voters also do not like.

So, Boehner faces a choice. Either he will marginalize the Tea Party or the tea Party will marginalize the GOP. I hope he realizes that he has the high hand here. The Tea Party strategy of trying to defund Obamacare has failed and is no longer even discussed. Now, the GOP is trying to change the narrative midstream, which is never easy to do, and focus on long-term debt. If the Tea Party balks at the kind of deal that is there to be had on long-term debt, Boehner needs to say to his Tea Party caucus: We tried your way. It failed.

Those members of Congress who remain beholden to the Tea Party, out of conviction or out of self-interest, tend to come from the kind of congressional districts that are completely safe for them. They only have to fear a primary challenge from the right. But, some Republicans serve in swing districts and they are the people who will likely lose unless the GOP recognizes that the antidote to dysfunction is governance. This happened to the Democrats in 2010. It was not the uber-lefties who lost their seats that year. It was the Blue Dogs, mostly pro-life, centrist Democrats like Kathy Dahlkemper, Steve Driehaus, and John Boccieri who lost their seats. T here are fewer swing districts today [2] than there were in 2010 to be sure. But, when you are polling at 24 percent, there are some districts that move into the swing column that would not normally be there.

In order to cloak the GOP in the mantle of governance, Boehner will have to break the Hastert Rule, which holds that no bill comes to the floor unless it enjoys majority support within the GOP caucus. At least until the date passes when a primary challenge can be launched, too many Republicans will recoil from the prospect of voting for the kind of legislation that would pass the Senate and be signed by the President. Here is where Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and House Democrats should play their card. They should make Boehner the promise that if he breaks the Hastert Rule to pass a budget and debt ceiling deal, and consequently faces a

challenge to his speakership, they will vote ?present,? allowing Boehner to retain the speaker?s gavel. In exchange, the Dems should demand a vote on the Senate-passed immigration bill. A new set of polls [3] indicate the passing immigration reform actually will help key House Republicans. Boehner can let most of his caucus vote against the measure, but he must let it pass the full chamber.

In addition to setting aside the Hastert Rule, the Republicans need to work with their state parties to create what I will dub the Sen. Mike Castle Rule. Of course, Mike Castle is not a senator. The GOP lost the chance to score an easy pick-up in the Delaware Senate race in 2010 because Castle lost the GOP primary to Christine ?I am not a witch? O?Donnell. No one is more scared by the Tea Party shenanigans than Republican Senate candidates. You can?t redistrict state borders and while the cultural divides in the country have led to increasingly sharp political divides, there are still plenty of states that are purple enough that the GOP can win a Senate seat with a reasonable candidate, but are sure to lose it if a Tea Party whacko is the candidate.

The way to end excessive partisanship in Washington is with effective bipartisanship. Passing a bipartisan budget deal, a bipartisan debt ceiling deal and bipartisan immigration reform will help shore up moderate Republicans in districts that are more purple than red. If the Tea Party continues to call the shots, the GOP will lose its majority and, then, have no influence on the future of the country. It is time for Boehner to insist that his caucus act like adults and, because too many of them can?t, forge a series of compromises with House Democrats. That is the only way the GOP even has a future and the only way the government can be re-opened, the debt ceiling can be raised and millions of fellow Americans who happen to lack documents can begin to come out of the shadows and live lives of dignity.

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