

It is Time for Conservatives to Lead

Contributed by Tom Pauken
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The recent victory of Ted Cruz in the U.S. Senate Republican primary and the electoral successes of a number of conservatives running for the Texas Legislature are strong indicators that the grassroots conservative movement, which proved so powerful in 2010, is alive and well in 2012.

While some liberal pundits are quick to dismiss the election results as a victory for the "far right", they miss the real message from the voters: There is a growing disconnection between many of the career politicians who have been in power for an extended period of time and the voters they are supposed to represent. "They don't represent us anymore — it is all about them" is a common refrain one hears at the grassroots level.

Ted Cruz and many of the successful conservatives running for the Legislature were able to put together a coalition of both economic and social conservatives, reminiscent of the Reagan coalition. In fact, many of the newcomers remind me of those conservative outsiders like myself and others who went to Washington with President Reagan in 1981 to challenge the political elites and, in the President's words, "to drain the swamps". Under President Reagan's leadership, a team of conservatives put in place a set of policies to address the serious issues facing our country at that time — high unemployment, double-digit inflation, and an America in decline on the world scene. The solutions were relatively simple and straightforward, garnering broad-based support from the American public. More importantly, by and large, these conservative policies proved successful in getting the economy moving again and accelerating the demise of the Soviet Empire.

That brings me to my bit of advice for Ted Cruz and the other successful, conservative candidates, particularly those elected to serve in the Texas Legislature: Be prepared to govern. While Democrats control the Presidency and the Senate nationally, here in Texas, Republicans are in charge of state government and we need to act like it. It is up to us to fix a flawed Robin Hood school finance scheme which funds public education in part by transferring property taxes from so-called property-rich school districts to poorer districts with the State acting as the redistribution agent, forcing many Texans to be double taxed on their property. Gov. Ann Richards first tried to implement this Robin Hood scheme in 1993 through a constitutional amendment. Texas voters turned it down by a margin of two to one only to have Richards and the Legislature pass a statute imposing the same tax on property owners.

Nearly 20 years and two Governors later, this flawed system of school financing is still in place. It is constantly the subject of school litigation (as is currently the case) and clearly is a violation of our constitutional prohibition against a statewide property tax. Our conservative legislators in Austin have an opportunity to show real leadership by replacing the Robin Hood finance scheme with a fairer and more equitable system of funding public education in Texas.

Our legislators also need to address our heavy reliance on a so-called 4 x 4 curriculum and a STAAR test designed to make all our high school students "college ready". This broken system of performance measurements places an excessive emphasis on high stakes, standardized testing that isn't doing anything to improve teaching and real learning. This "one size fits all" standard for educating kids needs to be replaced by a common-sense approach to education which recognizes that students learn differently and have different talents.

There are multiple pathways to a quality education and educational success which can prepare our Texas students to be college ready and career ready. What we are doing now isn't working, and we should replace test learning with real learning.

Issues relating to water and transportation infrastructure needs aren't going away. We can't keep passing the buck one legislative session to the next with short-term patches while long-term problems persist.

True conservative leadership requires reaching out beyond one's base of support and coming up with common sense solutions to the problems that need addressing. To quote State Rep.-elect Cecil Bell Jr., "To solve complex problems, it is essential to find the simplest solution possible. Otherwise, your 'solution' becomes part of the problem, trapped in the quagmire of its own bureaucracy."

With new conservative leaders like Bell coming to Austin, and a number of returning legislators equally determined to apply a common sense approach to the issues confronting Texas on multiple fronts, I am optimistic that the nucleus of a conservative team, similar to the one that worked so well during the Reagan era of American politics, is beginning to come together again. It is the difference between loyalty to individual politicians in power vs. loyalty to principle. With Reagan, we who were part of that team felt it was about loyalty to principle.

In his farewell address on January 11, 1989, Ronald Reagan had this to say: "They called it the Reagan Revolution... For me it always seemed more like a rediscovery of our values and our common sense."

It is time for the next Reagan Revolution to begin, and the reinforcements have landed.

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