

Opinion

Rebuilding the Democratic Party brand - Back to the future with a return to liberalism's Jeffersonian roots

Published: Wednesday, February 9, 2005 7:19 PM EST

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As the oldest political committee in the world elects a new chairman this week in meetings at the Washington Hilton, the Democratic Party faces a problem common to venerable institutions: a loss of brand equity.

In the marketplace, a brand is a story wrapped around a product to differentiate it from similar stuff, so you feel good when you buy for more reasons than just the utilitarian. Nikes aren't feet covers, they're coolness. My Jeep isn't transportation, it's a toy for a middle-aged boy.

The Democratic Party label – a two-century-old moniker – is suffering a branding dilemma similar to the Episcopal Church after the 1950s. You didn't go to the American branch of the Church of England just to visit God. Being Episcopalian was a statement about your old-line, blue blood. But then, along came the egalitarian, meritocratic '60s, and Episcopalian membership no longer had cachet. Professor James Twitchell points out in his recent "Branded Nation" that church membership slumped from 3.6 million in the 1960s to 2 million today.

Born in the agrarian era of its founder, Thomas Jefferson, the Democratic Party's original story was of a small central government serving self-sufficient "little people" (farmers, shop keepers, frontiersmen), prizing and preserving individual liberty – juxtaposed against the elitist federalists, and their monarchical, big central government ambition.

The Democratic Party story was refashioned in the industrial era, particularly with arrival of the New Deal, when one-size-fits-all, central authority, wealth-redistributive policies were appealing to those little guys. Most of them had traded self-sufficiency for wage labor. Their economic lives revolved around big impersonal corporations, against which they were represented by big labor.

But in a post-industrial, information economy, the little guys, who Democrats have always claimed to represent, are again more self-sufficient, empowered to make – tailor-make, in fact – choices for themselves. (I built my own Nikes online; a hundred pairs at Foot Locker weren't enough.) The "Central Authority Solutions" story offered by Democrats, from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries, lost luster. That's especially true with regard to economic issues. On the other hand, when it comes to lifestyle and personal choices – the social-cultural issue frame – the party still has some juice left from that original Jeffersonian story, which made individual liberty central to party ID.

People still vote Democratic, of course – they still buy the product – but the old-time Democratic religion has lost its revivalist energy. Nowhere is that reflected more than in the abandonment of the party's auxiliary label, "liberal."

Contrast that with Republicans, who universally embrace an ideology by name. Whether you're a libertarian, balanced-budget, Neo-Con, or religious right Republican, you call yourself "conservative!"

The "stickiness" (as marketplace brand managers would call it) of the Republican Party label is in the story enthusiastically shared by Republicans of all stripes: government, with its taxes and regulation, is the problem, not the solution.

You could reduce the GOP brand to this: "Government bad. America good. The marketplace will provide. In God we trust. Equal opportunity, but not equal outcomes, for all."

What's the story behind today's Democrat brand?

I'm a Democrat, but I'm not sure. I believe it's something like: "Government isn't all that bad; look at Social Security and Head Start. America isn't always that good, we try to impose our will on a multicultural world. The marketplace is full of bad guys who need to be restrained. Hey, we're religious, too. And redistributive social justice for all, because, except for me and my friends, racism endures."

Voters in the center find some of each party's message appealing, some appalling. The last two presidential elections and the partisan split in Congress prove it.

Believe what you will about each message – the Republican story has clarity going for it. The Democratic narrative sounds like a John Kerry speech – a little of this, a little of that.

It wasn't always so. From Jefferson, to Jackson's Democracy, the party of the people had an energizing little-government-for-the-little-guy ideology, firing up the base and attracting the center. And from FDR to LBJ, the message was clear: We'll use government to protect the little guy from those greedy bastards.

The usual prescriptions for party renewal come in two forms.

Centrists, like the Democratic Leadership Council, propose triangulation tactics that divert the attention of persuadable voters from the Washington-based politics of interest and identity group-dominated left liberals. DLC Democrats offer government as a tool to provide middle-class economic opportunity, not an end. They've been good at talking to the center, but haven't offered an energizing philosophy for the base. And their foreign policy increasingly sounds neo-conservative.

The second approach, offered by the reactionaries heavily represented in the party's congressional wing, preaches a return to an "old-time religion," "complete-the-New-Deal" ideology. That might have made sense once. But it is mismatched for today's educated voters, who want to make decisions from their homes, or at least their states. Economic left liberals often peddle a kind of middle-class neo-populism (Gore 2000, Edwards 2004), a William Jennings Bryan appeal to folks with SUVs and satellite TV. Old-time religion fires up the base, but leaves the center cold.

We need something radically different from those too tired story-lines. We need to stop fooling ourselves that we lose because the GOP outguns us with money and tactics. Terry McAuliffe did the party a huge favor by putting to rest that nonsense. We're losing because of message.

From our Jeffersonian roots, we have the glue to make the brand sticky again. The new desktop-empowered generation, turned on by Republican economic choice, but turned off by the social-cultural intolerance of the GOP Taliban wing, could embrace Democrats if we return to our founder's philosophy – a back-to-the-future Jeffersonian liberalism.

Jefferson, who said the government that governs least governs best, knew the era of big government was over before Bill Clinton proclaimed it. If we listen to the man from Monticello, who advocated "peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, but entangling alliances with none," we can rediscover our anti-war, anti-interventionist nerve. We can be as insistent as Republicans that pluralistic democracy and free markets are noble and worth emulating; but we must equally assert that they be spread by example, not force.

Jefferson can be an inspiration to our candidates, who need a better way to talk about religion and politics. Instead of mumbling about restoring faith to public life, Democrats can find the courage to say what we believe: We protect religious liberty by keeping God out of government. Our Founders knew that; there is not a single reference to God in the Constitution.

We need a new story. Here's rough cut: "Government: Assure liberty by staying as far away as possible from our bank accounts, our bedrooms and our bodies. Spread pluralistic democracy and free markets by example, not by force. Restore the moral authority of the mid-20th century civil rights movement, by fashioning public policy around individuals, not tribal identity groups."

It's a message that can inspire a 21st century base and attract voters who believe both parties are obsolete.

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