

CSE

GOP environmental agenda off target  
Business group issues guide on handling 'E' word

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Commentary

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No one fixes a tarnished political image overnight, but Republicans must be wondering whether their campaign to appear more environmentally correct is simply going nowhere.

Last week, environmentalists and Democrats alike were in stitches over leaked copies of "How to Discuss Environmental Issues & Change," a 10-point guide for GOP lawmakers on how to handle the "E" word.

Developed by the pro-business Citizens for a Sound Economy using reams of sophisticated polling data, the guide was meant to prevent the kind of eco-gaffe that tarred Republicans two years ago, when the party came under fire as anti-nature for trying to re-write federal environmental laws.

Unfortunately, CSE's guide, with its blunt public relations language and statistical breakdown of voter attitudes, will only make the GOP's new efforts to be "green" seem all the more cynical.

"Make it clear you, too, want a clean environment," reads a typical suggestion. "Focus groups show that people are more likely to empathize with your approach to environmental issues if they believe you are on their side." ... "Explain why you want a good environment: You have children, you are an outdoor photographer or sportsman, you enjoy the beauty of our natural resources, etc."

To be sure, Republicans aren't alone in their reliance on polls. President Bill Clinton won't select a tie or a CIA director without asking a pollster; and these days, most large environmental groups won't launch a protest that hasn't already been sanctioned by public opinion surveys.

Nor does anyone deny that the GOP's environmental rhetoric needs professional help. These are the same people who, in recent years, have publicly likened the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to the Gestapo, held "endangered salmon bake" campaign fund-raisers, and blamed the California floods on federal laws protecting "bugs and rodents."

Still, it's hard to imagine worse timing for a new spin campaign. The CSE guide comes just as some moderate Republicans are struggling to swing their party's environmental politics back toward the center.

"Something is wrong when polls show that the majority of Republican voters trust Democrats to protect the environment more than their own party," gripes an article by the group, Republicans for Environmental Protection.

And in a recent op-ed piece in The New York Times entitled "Nature is not a liberal plot," Arizona Republican John McCain asks, "Have Republicans abandoned their roots as the party of Theodore Roosevelt, who maintained that government's most important task, with the exception of national security, is to leave posterity a land in better condition than they received it? ...

"Republicans should not allow the fringes of the party to set a radical agenda that no more represents the mainstream of Republicans than environmental extremists represent the mainstream of the Democratic Party."

Presumably, neither REP nor McCain would be any happier with an environmental agenda set by pollsters. Indeed, even as it seeks to smooth the party's "green" image as cynical and opportunist, the advice CSE offers is itself so cynical and opportunist that it reads like bad parody.

Worse, the CSE guide, with its careful analysis of public attitudes, provides an embarrassingly candid reflection of just how confused party leadership is on the environmental issue and how far off target the GOP environmental agenda has fallen.

For example, for many GOP officials, environmental strategy has for years consisted largely of coming up with new and insulting names for environmentalists. But according to the guide, that no longer works: "Because more voters react favorably than unfavorably to information from individuals or organizations described as 'environmentalist,' avoid referring to your opponents as 'extremist' or 'radical.'"

Then there was the GOP belief that voters were in near revolt over environmental "over-regulation." But this, too, according to the guide, was off base.

Polls show "no consensus that there is too much regulation, or that environmental protection costs too much. ... Most voters believe today's environmental standards and regulations are 'just about right' or 'not strict enough.'"

Or take the GOP tenet that voters see environmental issues only in monetary terms and thus were aching for more "cost-effective" environmental laws. In truth, as the GOP guide admits, "A plurality of voters (42 percent) believe Republican efforts to reform environmental laws are motivated by their desire to make it easier for business to increase profits."

The guide even makes suggestions about word choice. "It's not 'reform,' it is 'modernizing,' reads one passage. "Reform is another word that, because of voter cynicism and its overuse with other issues, sends mixed signals.

"Focus groups indicate people are more likely to respond positively to change when the word 'modernizing' is used in describing our efforts on environmental protection. The word 'modernizing' helps explain, in part, the motive for change. Specifically, it is reasonable that as we approach a new century, we should and can begin thinking about new ways of doing things."

And, in fact, taken by themselves, some of CSE's points center on legitimate public policy issues. Many environmental laws are burdensome and awkward and badly in need of review. Moreover, not all Republicans see the EPA as the Gestapo. Although it's true that members from the "the fringes of the party," to use McCain's term, now run key party posts, they do not speak for the many Republican moderates or just over them.

But a 10-point guide is hardly the way to fix things and party officials should know that.

In late 1995, as party leaders worried about how the GOP's souring "green" image would play in the 1996 elections, leaders handed out "Think Globally, Act Locally," an unintentionally hilarious guide suggesting 15 ways members could bolster their sorry environmental image. Among them: Plant a tree, join local Earth Day celebrations and use recycled office products.

But don't wait, warned the guide: "To build credibility you must engage this agenda before your opponents can label your efforts ecraven, election-year gimmicks." No doubt, such criticisms hadn't even entered the minds of "greens" and Democrats this time around.

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