

WAYNE GILCHREST HAS JUST ABOUT HAD IT with his party, and he won't shy away from telling you about it. In March, the eight-term Maryland congressman and longtime Republican moderate lost a primary to staunchly conservative state Sen. Andy Harris, who won largely on the strength of votes from what Gilchrest terms "Karl Rove's party."

"They knew how to get the base out," says Gilchrest sarcastically. "Just say 'conservative' 15 times in one sentence."

It's not that his campaign didn't see it coming, Gilchrest says. For months the objective was getting moderates out to the polls—voters who simply didn't turn out come Election Day. If they had, says Gilchrest, he would have surely won. His defeat puts the Maryland Republican among the ranks of GOP moderates who, in the past few years, have been all but ousted from a party that seemingly has no place for middle-of-the-roaders. Many of them have chosen to retire or have lost their re-election bids. The vast majority of those seats have been taken over by Democrats.

The further bad news for moderate stalwarts is that the political bench is looking pretty thin. It's why groups like the Republican Leadership Council, an organization that promotes a "fiscally conservative, socially inclusive" GOP, are beginning to work from

the ground up, backing candidates for city and county councils and working to turn the tide in state legislatures—all in the hopes of stemming the influence of the right wing and bringing the party back to the center of American politics.

"We have to get back to the basic, block-and-tackle, down-in-the-trenches political grunt work that Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition leveraged to such great success," says Pete Abel, an RLC volunteer and organizer in Missouri, and author of the blog, *The Moderate Voice*. On a grassroots level, he says the GOP's moderate wing must be rebuilt the same way the Christian right took over the party: fielding candidates at the most local of levels and getting moderate Republicans elected to school boards, city councils, state legislatures and ultimately Congress.

Abel says it's as basic as "mining the grassroots of the party, building and working databases of moderate Republicans,

writing letters and e-mails." But these party building tools are all too foreign to moderates, who don't have any real organizing infrastructure.

"We really need to pay more attention to what's happening at the state and local level," says Christine Todd Whitman, the former New Jersey governor who now heads the RLC. "[Since 2006] we've seen nine state legislatures flip from Republican [control] to Democrat. That has enormous implications when it comes time to re-draw districts." Come 2010, the redistricting process is one Whitman fears will make it even harder for moderate Republicans to win and hold onto congressional seats, as a slew of marginal GOP districts may very well be re-drawn into territory that's more favorable to Democrats.

There's certainly reason to worry. The list of names that make up the elected leadership of middle-of-the-road Republican groups like the Main Street Partnership is littered with retirements, recent stinging defeats and potentially vulnerable incumbents. Of the 40 members of Congress who are associated with the Main Street Partnership, 10 are retiring in 2008, one lost in a high-profile Republican primary to a conservative opponent, and another 10 are in the electoral crosshairs of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

The backlash against the GOP in 2006—large-

It's No Party for Republican Moderates

But is the center gone for good?

ly over the war in Iraq—didn't spare moderate Republicans, many of whom were far less hawkish on the war. At least six moderates lost their seats in 2006 and several others retired. In the Senate, Rhode Island's Lincoln Chaffee was one of the biggest casualties. In the House, the most notable loss was longtime Iowa Rep. Jim Leach, who served in Congress for some 30 years, much to the chagrin of many conservatives.

"Moderates are the largest unrepresented group in national politics today," says Leach. "And they have been marginalized and alienated from the Republican Party." A pre-election dust-up between Leach and the NRCC over mailers the group wanted to drop in his district led some social conservatives in Leach's district to sit on their hands on Election Day and helped send him packing. "I have less than high regard for politicians who manipulate wedge issues," says the soft-spoken former congressman.

BY SHANE D'APRILE

Moving forward, the challenges for the moderate forces are legion. For one, they need resources, both money and manpower. Second, they need candidates to proudly carry the moderate banner. And perhaps the biggest obstacle: They need something to help motivate and mobilize moderate voters. That's the one that has evangelicals and other conservatives the least worried.

Scott Faircloth gets a kick out of the term moderate activist. "Do they really exist?" he asks with a laugh. A marketing and fundraising consultant for Christian conservative candidates and causes, Faircloth has worked on both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns, as well as for one of Alan Keyes' presidential runs and the Senate campaign of Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback. "I think people just want to vote for somebody that's passionate about something," he says, "somebody that takes a stand on issues." By definition, Faircloth says, moderates just don't fit the mold.

Grassroots conservative strategist Gary Marx says moderates face two major problems when it comes to organizing. First, they lack a natural base from which to start. Where Ralph Reed encouraged voter registration drives at local churches, "moderates don't really have any equivalent," says Marx, a veteran of both Bush campaigns and Mitt Romney's 2008 bid. "What would be the basic organizing bloc, the local country club?" And second, there isn't a single issue to rally around.

While it may not be just one issue that motivates those in the middle, what shouldn't be underestimated, says Whitman, is the feeling of disenfranchisement among many moderates who are marginalized by the far right. "It's a one-way street with them," says a frustrated Whitman. "You know, as Republican moderates we're expected to support a conservative candidate, no questions asked. But it never seems to work the other way around."

It's much the same feeling that spurred

the Christian Coalition to action in the early 1990's. Reed and others successfully preached to the evangelical masses that power and political influence could be won, and that getting inside the political process would be worth the years of work it would take to actually get there. The net result was a core group of evangelical leaders swept into Congress when the GOP finally took control in 1994, and perhaps the culmination of their efforts was the election of President Bush in 2000. In the years since, evangelical conservatives have seen major victories on core issues like abortion and Supreme Court nominees.

Believe it or not, says Faircloth, the evangelical rallying cry has receded in the past couple of years and the political efforts of those on the far right have become more decentralized and less well-funded. "There is a complacency that's set in a little bit because we have two quote-unquote guys on our side up there in [Supreme Court justices] John Roberts and Sam Alito," he says. "And that was really the last major issue that united conservatives. Just remember

how pissed off everybody was when Harriet Miers was nominated."

Today, the Christian Coalition is all but non-existent. The group still plans to distribute millions of its famed voter guides in 2008, but with more than a million dollars of debt the group is no longer the financial force it once was. On the state level, much of the organizing is done by groups like James Dobson's Focus on the Family, which has a network of organizations working in individual states. But the effort is almost entirely decentralized.

"It's more a lack of enthusiasm right now," Marx says, "but it's not a reflection on organizational prowess. There is less participation broadly by religious conservatives, but there are always ebbs and flows." Without the Christian Coalition, he says, the electoral focus no longer goes below state level elections. "I don't see anybody out there right now working on school boards

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The RLC's main focus is not electing McCain, but preventing state legislatures from flipping Democratic.

or city councils and mayoral races," he says. "People have lost the focus on building a bench for the long term, and most of the issues they care about are at the state and national level."

It's one place where Republican moderates are convinced they can grow. In 2008, the RLC's primary focus is not helping elect John McCain president. Instead, it's putting most of its energy into preventing more state legislatures from flipping over to Democratic control. The RLC is looking toward three or four states where statehouse margins are thin, and RLC bigwigs like former Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele and former U.S. Sen. John Danforth are traversing the country to headline fundraisers for key state legislators.

The goal is to prevent moderate legislators from sharing the fate of people like former Iowa state Sen. Maggie Tinsman. Prior to her 2006 primary defeat, Tinsman went door to door trying to mobilize her longtime moderate backers.

"I simply couldn't motivate them, they didn't think it was a real race," she says. A supporter of abortion rights and opponent of an amendment to ban gay marriage, Tinsman says primary opponents, usually funded by Christian Conservatives, were numerous over the course of her 18 years in the state Senate. "My supporters all said to me, 'Oh, you'll get reelected, you always do.'" Tinsman lost her primary by 67 votes.

The lesson? "We've got to organize better," she says. "There's this huge pool of disaffected Republicans out there who are turned off by the direction of the party, and a lot of them are either starting to vote Democrat or they're just staying home."

RLC spokeswoman Heather Grizzle says the group is developing GOTV strategies aimed at motivating moderates primarily on fiscal issues, in the hopes that "we can just agree to disagree on the social issues." In 2007 the group tested a new voter targeting model in Whitman's home state of New Jersey, where the RLC proudly boasts 14 victories last year, in offices from town clerk to the state senate. The RLC also notes city council victories for its candidates in Michigan and Ohio.

For now, the resources the group can provide are minimal. While thousands of dollars did go to some of its New Jersey-backed candidates, the RLC's political action committee donated just \$250 to its favored candidates in Ohio and Michigan, and the group just can't compete yet with conservative organizations like Club for Growth, which spent heavily against Rep. Wayne Gilchrest. The conservative PAC has taken an increasingly active role in GOP primaries. It spent some \$400,000 making the case against Gilchrest, whose only retort from outside groups was the \$10,000 his campaign received—combined—from the Main Street Partnership and the RLC.

Currently, the RLC has "local captains" in some 20 states, but not much staff to go along with them. Grizzle says it's a staff of seven that does the bulk of the work.

"If you look at the success the Christian Coalition had, it was because they got their organizers in front of people and explained their message person to person," says Phillip Stutts, a Republican consultant who heads Phillip Stutts & Company. "They had people who literally lived, breathed and died the social conservative message, and that was the motivating factor."

Stutts, who directed the 72-hour plan for George Bush's reelection campaign, says that kind of organizing takes years to develop. And once groups like the RLC identify the issues that move moderates most, they have to build a coalition to rally around those issues. Only then will they know if the plan to get those voters out to the polls works. "It all takes time, a lot of money and a lot of bodies," Stutts says. "It can't be done in one election cycle, but if they have a real long-term outlook on this they have just as good an opportunity as a social conservative group."

And while the RLC won't put a timetable on success, one thing the committee will need is to keep disaffected moderates in the party fold and win commitment to the cause of fixing the GOP. The problem, says Gilchrest, will likely be convincing those moderates to stick it out and try to reform the party from the inside out—something not even he has much interest in.

"I'm 62 years old," he says. "So given the physical order of things I probably have a good 20 years left. Do I want to spend them talking to people who've called me a RINO (Republican In Name Only) for the past 18 years? Or trying to convince Ralph Reed that gay couples are normal, God-fearing people? I don't think so." ■

Shane D'Aprile is web editor for Politics magazine.