

Election lesson: Can't sell ideas the voters won't buy



KATHLEEN PARKER says contrary to Democratic assertions, President Obama's problem wasn't an inability to communicate his policies to the public.

TWO words: Narrative, schmarrative.

Democrats have talked endlessly about the importance of narrative — missing in President Obama's case. We've heard over and over about the lack of smart messaging and the president's failure to communicate. If only Obama could better express himself, all would be well.

Seriously? This is the same president whose soaring rhetoric once sent his ratings into the heavenly realm and who, after assuming office, never stopped expressing himself.

For months, he was everywhere. Talking, talking, talking. Admit it. How many times did you flip on the tube and say, "Omigod, he's talking again"? Several teleprompters had to take early retirement from sheer exhaustion.

Here's a narrative: You can't sell people what they don't want, no matter how mellifluous your pitch. This is the clear message of the midterm elections, and who didn't know?

Only Democrats, apparently.

They — the imperial "they" — say that the people weren't voting against the president. Check. Most Americans don't dislike the president, as in the person. Obama didn't create this dismal economy, and most acknowledge that fact. But voters were clearly casting a ballot against his policies.

And no, the tea partiers weren't voting against his pigmentation, as my colleague Eugene Robinson suggested in a recent column. "Take back the country," the popular tea party refrain, doesn't mean reclaim it from "the black man." It means reclaim it from a rogue government.

There were so many clues, even the clues-ness should have seen what was coming.

In February 2009, Obama had an approval rating of 76 percent. Let me repeat that: 76 percent!!! Few but God poll better. Obviously, one can only go downhill from there, but you can't pin the slide on racism. All those people didn't suddenly realize their president was African-American and become racists.

Are there racists in America? Sure. And some of them show up at tea-party rallies. Say what you will about the tea party, and there's plenty to say, but it is fundamentally unfair to say the tea partiers are racist. It is also just plain incorrect to say that opposition to Obama is anti-black. The election was a referendum on policies that are widely viewed as too overreaching and, therefore, ultimately, threatening to individual freedom. It's that simple.

The essential question that voters were answering was whether government or the

private sector is better suited to create jobs. This is a question on which historians and economists disagree, but it was the crux of Tuesday's election. At the risk of oversimplifying, the midterm bloodbath was a fight over capitalism.

Whether candidates could properly articulate market arguments was less important than whether they understood that expanded government means less individual freedom. You don't need a doctorate in Keynesian theory to get them apples.

Obama's declining popularity since his planet-realigning ascendancy is easy enough to graph. The dipping points in his approval ratings correspond to specific agenda items, such as the stimulus bill and health care reform. Interspersed among those major initiatives were red flags the size of Chile.

In November 2009, New Jersey and Virginia both elected Republican governors — Chris Christie and Bob McDonnell, respectively. These two elections were referendums on Obama's agenda, specifically tied to health care. Then in January came Republican Scott Brown in Massachusetts, another Democratic state, thundering into the Senate to fill the slot left vacant by Ted Kennedy's death.

That's narrative for you. Yet somehow Democrats couldn't see it. They turned a blind eye and did the very thing Americans loathe: telegraphed disdain for the misinformed masses and insisted that people would like what their government was doing for them once they understood it. Translation: Shut up and take your medicine.

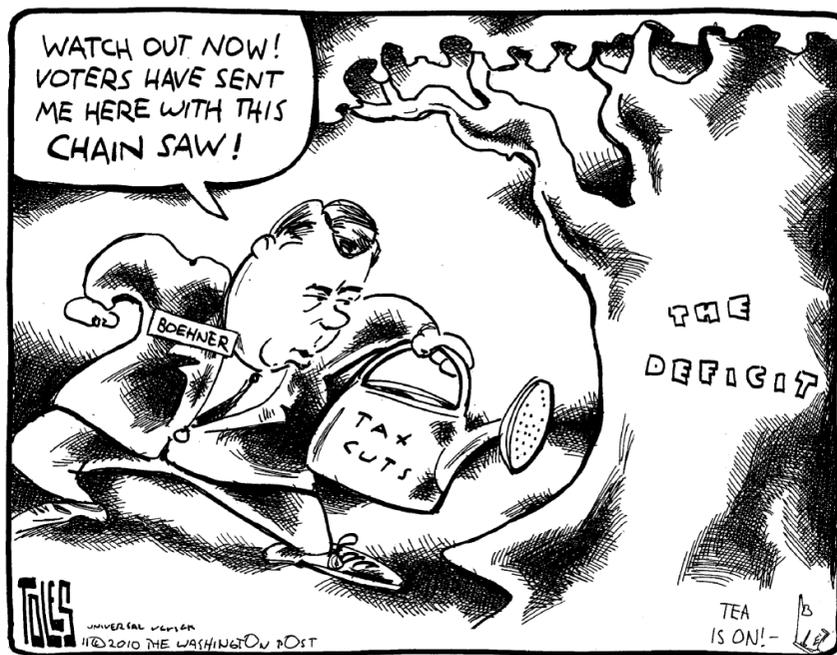
It was less than reassuring to hear House Speaker Nancy Pelosi tell a gathering of county officials: "We have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it."

Instead of hearing the people's voices, Democrats and the White House doubled down and began to demonize the opposition. It was Rush Limbaugh's fault. Fox News was the problem. John Boehner, today the presumptive speaker of the House, became a target du jour. In an echo of some of the tea party's worst moments, the White House advanced the them-versus-us mantra.

They're the problem. Except, alas, "they" were The People. And their voices were being ignored. For better or worse, our system of governance doesn't include a monarchy.

Obama didn't need to be a better communicator. He needed to be a better listener. End of story.

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Time for Latin America to reconsider prohibition

Legalizing marijuana a matter of when, not if

By ERIKA DE LA GARZA and WILLIAM MARTIN

ON Tuesday, prohibitionists again managed to hold a fraying line when Californians defeated Proposition 19, which would have legalized the production, sale and use of small quantities of marijuana by people 21 or older. Though disappointed by the results, Prop 19 supporters have considerable cause for optimism. The approximately 46 percent of those who approved the measure was overweighted with younger voters. For them, legalization is a matter of when, not if. That assessment is supported by the ease with which Californians can already obtain cannabis legally at hundreds of medical dispensaries in the state and by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's recently signing into law a bill that reduces the penalties for marijuana possession from a misdemeanor to an infraction comparable to a traffic ticket. The scent blowin' in the wind is unmistakable, and where California leads, others will follow.

Among those presumably pleased by Prop 19's defeat in this contest were Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Felipe Calderón of Mexico, both of whom had criticized the measure. How, they asked, could they send peasant farmers in their countries to jail for growing a crop they could legally sell in California? And how could the United States, which has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on its 40-year War on Drugs, even consider legalizing the drug it has battled so vigorously? This opinion contrasts sharply with that of their predecessors, Presidents César Gaviria of Colombia and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, who joined President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil and a blue-ribbon assemblage of decision-makers in recommending the decriminalization of marijuana in the 2009 Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy.

As with any policy proposal, one must consider the ultimate goal. In assessing the anti-drug effort known as Plan Colombia, critics note that the billions of dollars the U.S. poured into that campaign did not significantly decrease the shipment of cocaine to the United States. Supporters of Plan Colombia, however, point out that the Medellín and Cali cartels were dramatically crippled and dismantled and that Medellín is no longer one of the most dangerous cities in the world. If the objective of Plan Colombia was to decrease drug production — or even consumption — the policy clearly failed. If it was to make Colombia a safer country by dismantling the major drug cartels, it may have succeeded.

What might legalizing marijuana achieve? In 2009, law-enforcement officials made nearly 860,000 arrests in this country for marijuana violations. Of those charged, near-

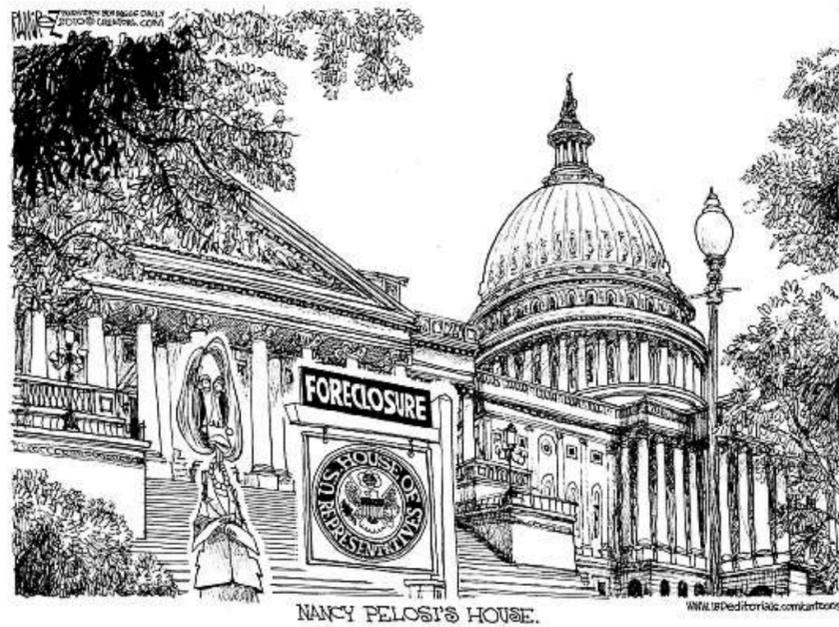
ly 88 percent were for possession only. Legalization supporters argue that regulating and taxing marijuana would dramatically reduce costs associated with arrests, adjudication and incarceration, and would provide revenue that could be used for drug education and treatment. They also argue that legalization would significantly shrink the income of drug-trafficking organizations. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) long asserted that marijuana provides at least 60 percent of the Mexican cartels' income. The actual figure is likely lower than that — the ONDCP now calls precise estimates "problematic" — but making the drug available legally would clearly affect the cartels' operations, particularly if other states were to follow California's lead.

Of course, the cartels would continue to traffic in cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines and to engage in other crimes such as kidnapping and extortion. Indeed, prohibitionist policies have enabled these criminal gangs to amass such wealth, strength and sophistication that the wounds legal marijuana would inflict would be severe, but not fatal. We can't be certain about the full effects legalization would produce. We do know that long-standing efforts to reduce production and consumption by focusing on eradication, interdiction and incarceration have failed, with tragic consequences. Had it passed, Prop 19 wouldn't have solved all the grave problems associated with drugs in California, Mexico, or anywhere else. Yet even bringing it to a public vote — and, in the process, making it a topic of serious national conversation — was a huge step in the right direction.

In October's XII Tuxtla Summit, a political discussion forum among Mexico, Colombia, the seven Central American countries and the Dominican Republic, there was a strong regional commitment to develop coordinated policies to combat the problems associated with drugs and transnational organized crime. All heads of state and their representatives at the summit agreed — as does President Obama — that drug trafficking is a shared problem with shared responsibility and needs to be addressed with coordinated, joint actions.

Instead of reprimanding the U.S. and Californians for Prop 19 — as they did at the Tuxtla Summit — Latin American heads of state should embrace and promote open debates about drug policy among decision-makers, law-enforcement officials, health care professionals, and the general public. A drug-free America, South or North, is a fantasy. Zero Tolerance a destructive delusion. Just saying no to prohibition will not solve all the problems caused by the use of drugs, legal and illegal, but it is a necessary start.

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Get ready for the infighting in wake of GOP landslide



JONAH GOLDBERG says look for the populist vs. establishment spat to re-emerge, especially with the crowded field of Republican presidential contenders.

HERE'S some good news for Democrats who've been blue lately: The coming GOP congressional surge will inevitably lead to a lot of disarray on the right. There will be infighting, bickering and charges of betrayal aplenty. The tea-infused populists will bark at — and sometimes bite — the so-called elitists. Many in the Republican establishment will, in turn, show no small amount of ingratitude to the populists who breathed new life into it.

Now, this might seem like cold comfort to those liberals who actually believed in their own hype about President Obama ushering in what Time magazine called a "new liberal order" that was supposed to last a generation but began petering out when Scott Brown won Ted Kennedy's Senate seat.

So if liberals will take no solace from this prediction, perhaps conservatives will. You

wouldn't know it from much of the mainstream news media coverage, which has focused almost entirely on the tea parties and the GOP, but the 2010 midterms were never about the Republicans. Think about how much coverage you've seen of Delaware Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell or New York gubernatorial contender Carl Paladino, two candidates who were always long shots at best. Now think how little you've seen of say, Ron Johnson, the Wisconsin rookie politician who defeated Russ Feingold, the progressive lion of the Senate now that Teddy Kennedy is gone. Johnson is a solid, serious, candidate and hence bad copy for a press corps at least in part eager to keep the attention off the Democrats.

In short, as John Podhoretz recently wrote in the New York Post, this election isn't so much a coronation for the Republicans as it is

a vote of no confidence in the Democrats. The political turmoil on the right, most commonly understood as the tea parties versus the establishment, that we've witnessed over the last year was in many respects a sideshow compared with the fact that support of Obama and the Democrats among independents, moderate Republicans, the elderly and, most recently, among women and low-income families, has cratered. Last week's New York Times/CBS News poll found that for the first time since 1982, when polling began, the GOP has the edge among women. For the most part, the bulk of these voters aren't moving to the GOP so much as they are fleeing the Democrats.

And that is why the Republicans are going to start turning on each other. It's the nature of politics that when you're out of power, everyone can agree on what the top priority should be: Get back in power. But, the only way to get back in power is to attract people who might not share all of your goals. Majority coalitions by definition have diverse groups within them. FDR's coalition had everybody from Klansmen to blacks, socialists to industrialists. The new GOP coalition isn't nearly so exotic, but it does have its internal contradictions.

We've had a preview of them in the Delaware primary fight between O'Donnell and

Michael Castle. O'Donnell partisans hold that inside-the-Beltway Republicans refused to rally to a right-wing stalwart. O'Donnell's conservative critics insist that they are no less sincere in their principles; they simply thought O'Donnell was a risky choice compared with the comparative sure bet the GOP had in Castle to take Joe Biden's seat.

The populist vs. establishment storyline is going to come back with a vengeance, particularly given the crowded field of potential GOP presidential contenders. Sarah Palin and Mike Huckabee won't be the only ones writing off criticism from Karl Rove or George Will as "inside the Beltway elitism."

More important than the intraconservative fights is the fact that the moderates, independents, women and young people fleeing the Obama coalition to make up a new Republican majority aren't much interested in lending their weight to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's agenda to make Obama a "one-term president." Much like the tea partiers, they would like to see the GOP accomplish something substantive over the next two years. The arguing begins the second the GOP starts acting on that substance.

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