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Ex-Rep. Davis says intra-party battles need to happen for the GOP to win

By: Reid Wilson

Ex-Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.), the man who once headed the GOP's congressional campaign committee, said Republicans need to have a battle between centrists and conservatives in order to return to power.

Davis, now the president of the centrist Republican Main Street Partnership, told reporters on Thursday that he is optimistic that centrists will be more widely represented among the House GOP Conference if the party picks up seats in 2010, but he said it is up to the National Republican Congressional Committee and its Senate counterpart to make sure Republican nominees can win.

"It is right for these committees to get involved and pick the strongest candidates. When I was campaign chairman, we did this unapologetically to make sure that we got the right candidates in, and we ended up picking up seats," said Davis, who headed the NRCC during the 2002 cycle.

"If you leave it just to local committees sometimes, you have a very narrow constituency to which these candidates are appealing," he added.

Even as Republicans have found success in recruiting candidates widely seen as having a strong chance in a general election in key Senate races, including in Illinois, Colorado and New Hampshire, conservatives at the local level have voiced concern at those candidates' ideological bona fides.

Driven by the vocal right, challengers in all three states have emerged, although they are distinct underdogs.

"The people who run the blogs, do the talk radio, they just have a different bent on the whole thing. They just have a different outlook on the world," Davis said. In the battle to establish a centrist footprint within the GOP, he said, "you've got to slug it out."

"The difficulty comes when the party shrinks, which we've done," he said. "We've been in a contractual mode in the last eight years. You shrink to the base, and the base tends to be a little harder core and less willing to give up power. Our strength is now among the independents and generating a base turnout. It's got to be resolved."

"A right-centered party can't be a majority nationally," Davis added.

Davis said he believed Republicans have begun a comeback, and that centrists would have to be a part of that return to power. Without centrists, he said, the GOP will become a regional party.

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And, even if voters remain unwilling to trust Republicans to govern, the party could benefit in the 2010 elections because voters will view the GOP as a check on the power of President Barack Obama rather than as handing them the keys to government.

"I'm not sure [voters] want to put Republicans in charge of anything again," he said. "Democrats have the governing momentum. They have the legislative power. But the political equation has now shifted, as it often does, to the out party."

Davis pointed to healthcare reform as a key example of pressure on Democratic lawmakers. With an overwhelming Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, the White House has little excuse not to get a bill done. Therefore, instead of reaching out to Republicans, President Obama has to placate both liberals anxious for payoff after so many years out of power and Blue Dogs nervous about losing their seats in 2010.

Davis pointed to Reps. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Mike Castle (R-Del.) as two centrists who could help broaden the Republican base. Kirk is running for Senate, while Castle is contemplating a bid.

Davis also suggested that ex-Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.) may still be in the picture as a challenger to Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), and that ex-Rep. Charlie Bass (R-N.H.) could still mount a campaign for his old job. Porter's office declined to make him available for comment, while Bass could not be reached late Thursday afternoon.

Offering his take at the voting blocs most vulnerable to Republican inroads, Davis pointed to seniors, who turn out more than other groups in midterm elections and among whom Obama did not do particularly well in 2008. Too, he said, Obama's 52 percent margin among voters making more than \$250,000 a year could be reversed, especially as concerns about taxes and spending mount.

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