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Newsroom

Ken McKay '06 Plans GOP Revival

This week's Providence Phoenix features a cover story on Ken McKay '06, who - the Phoenix asserts - may be just the man to revive the GOP in Rhode Island.

From the [PROVIDENCE PHOENIX](#): "[The plan to turn Rhode Island red: GOP strategist Ken McKay is quietly plotting a data-driven explosion of the state's one-party rule](#)" by David Scharffenberg



June 22, 2011: The Rhode Island Republican Party's reputation for ineptitude is, by any reasonable measure, richly deserved.

Sure, the party held the governor's office for much of the last two decades. But no longer. Indeed, it doesn't claim a single statewide post at the moment.

Its presence in the General Assembly has long been tiny. Its fundraising is anemic. And the GOP's hapless image only compounds the problem — making it difficult to attract the money and solid candidates that could resurrect the brand.

"People don't trust in the ability of the Republican Party to succeed," says former Rhode Island Republican Party chairman Giovanni Cicione, "and that's that."

But listen closely and you'll hear some hope, in conservative circles, for a more professional operation. Hope, even, for a revolution.

Kenneth McKay IV [RWU Law '06], the charismatic political strategist who ran Donald Carcieri's successful gubernatorial campaigns and later served as chief of staff at the Republican National Committee, has come home to revive Rhode Island's moribund GOP. And he's got a plan.

It's one part truth-telling; McKay, just a few months into his tenure as state party chairman, has developed a reputation for hyper-partisan bomb-throwing that makes even some in the local GOP blanche.

But the other part — the more consequential part — isn't getting headlines; the chairman, with help from a wise-cracking computer geek holed up in the South County woods, is quietly plotting a data-driven explosion of Rhode Island's one-party rule.

And if Republicans can pull it off — if they can turn one of the bluest states in the country red, or at least a deep shade of purple — the impact could be seismic, McKay suggests.

"I think we have the opportunity to do something really creative and shock people," he says, sitting in the party's modest basement headquarters at a Warwick strip mall.

"I think we are, in Rhode Island right now, involved in the future of conservative politics in America."

THE MAN

That sort of grandiose pronouncement is typical for McKay. Indeed, his audacity is part of his appeal.

But it is offset by a blunt appreciation for reality; a self-deprecating, easy charm; an isn't-this-fun appreciation for even the most lopsided of challenges.

We may not, in the end, win a single new seat in the General Assembly next fall, he says with a broad grin, but we're sure as hell going to try.

The chairman, 44, was born in Providence, where his father managed the family business, McKay's Furniture, founded in 1900.

When the store closed, the McKays moved south to help launch a new shop in North Kingstown, which had served as home base for much of the clan since the 1940s when Ken's grandfather Kenneth McKay, Jr. converted the family's fishing cottage into a permanent residence.

Ken's dad soon left McKay's Furniture to take a job as a sales representative for a furniture manufacturer, though. And the family moved around as his sales terrain shifted. Upstate New York. Massachusetts.

The McKays weren't all that political, Ken says. But he counts long conversations with his grandfather and his grandfather's best friend Les Flood, who recently died, as formative.

They talked about running the family business, he says, and how "you act as a man" — opening doors for people, smiling, working hard.

"From those guys, I picked up certain beliefs," he says. "People are who they are; you're not going to make things better by telling people how they should behave; you're not going to make things better by giving people stuff for free."

After high school, McKay served in the Army for three years and graduated from High Point University in North Carolina, returning to Rhode Island in 1991. He worked at the furniture store for a time before **enrolling in Roger Williams University School of Law** and taking a job at Taft & McSalley in Cranston.

In 2002, the firm's owner Jim Taft introduced him to retired businessman Carcieri and the pair — political novices both — ran an out-of-nowhere gubernatorial campaign that scored an upset in the Republican primary and toppled a relatively weak Democratic nominee in Myrth York.

Curt Anderson, a political strategist with Alexandria, Virginia-based OnMessage, was the chief consultant on the Carcieri campaigns. He says McKay's gift was for focusing on the big picture and the nuts and bolts at the same time — no small challenge in a Carcieri camp of political novices proferring "some really nutty ideas."

The campaign manager, he adds, brought a sort of blue-collar, anti-elitist perspective to the job that works well in this state. "People come from outside Rhode Island and they think, 'Oh, it's Massachusetts,' " Anderson says. "Well, not really."

A couple of years after McKay left the Carcieri Administration, where he served as chief of staff, Anderson asked if he would be interested in working with ascendant Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele.

When he took the job as Steele's chief of staff just after President Obama's inauguration, says McKay, the Republicans "were never going to win another election.

"One year later, we made the Democrats pay the ultimate price for their health care plan," he says, scoring gubernatorial victories in New Jersey and Virginia and taking Ted Kennedy's Massachusetts Senate seat in stunning fashion.

But McKay, who flew back to Rhode Island on the weekends to see his wife and three sons, is the first to say the local campaigns deserve more credit than Washington-based advisers for those victories. And the RNC's record, during his tenure, was mixed.

The committee stumbled on fundraising. And Steele nearly unraveled amid a series of foot-in-mouth public statements and a too-heavy reliance on advisers from his native Maryland.

McKay won't talk about his former boss, but friends say he had to spend an inordinate amount of time soothing party leaders and Republican donors worried about Steele's leadership.

When an RNC staffer expensed a night out with young donors at a bondage-themed club in West Hollywood, creating a media storm, Steele sacrificed McKay — who, by all accounts, had no involvement with the matter. He was in North Kingstown pumping out his flooded house when he learned he had resigned.

It was a difficult moment. But McKay emerged with his reputation intact. And he seems genuinely fond of his time in Washington. "It was the best job I ever had," he says. "It's campaigning, and I love campaigning."

THE FILE

But McKay's campaign record, if strong, is not unblemished. During the governor's first term, he took a leave from his chief of staff post to oversee the GOP's midterm election operation. And the results were less than satisfactory.

The party took a few seats — not a failure by Rhode Island Republican Party standards, but hardly the General Assembly makeover that Carcieri needed to become a real force on Smith Hill.

The chief lesson of the campaign, McKay says: he relied too much on message, and not enough on grassroots organizing.

Now, as he gears up for another crack at Rhode Island's Democratic power structure, he is focused squarely on the ground game. And that means sharpening the single most important organizing tool for any party: its voter file.

The file is a sprawling database of registered voters: their political leanings, voting histories — do they turn out for every Town Council election or just the quadrennial presidential contest? — and increasingly, their tastes in magazines and coffee shops.

Indeed, the data-mining explosion of the last decade or so has made the voter file an exponentially more sophisticated tool, allowing for specifically tailored messages for, say, mothers with sons in the military or voters who score seven or higher on a 1-to-10 scale of environmental consciousness.

George W. Bush's file was considered the holy grail of American politics for years; a microtargeting monster. But Barack Obama and the Democrats surged ahead in the 2008 election.

Among the key figures in that surge: Steve Adler, a sharp-tongued Providence native, with no particular allegiance to the Democrats, who co-founded the Voter Activation Network (VAN) company in 2001 — running it out of his East Side basement until the electric bills for his 37 servers grew too large.

The strength of VAN's signature product, VoteBuilder, is its open-source, bottom-up orientation: political candidates from City Council to Congress feed voter information gleaned from door-knocking and telephone surveys into an ever-expanding and constantly updated Democratic National Committee database that can be diced and deployed in all manner of clever ways.

Catalist, a private company headed by former Clinton aide Harold Ickes, has taken this decentralized approach to its logical conclusion: building its own voter file, layering on commercial data on magazine subscriptions and the like, and opening it up to a wide range of Democratic-friendly labor unions, environmental advocates, and pro-choice organizations — including some in Rhode Island — that keep buttressing it with new information.

One distinct advantage for Catalist: it is, as a private entity, not subject to the campaign finance restrictions that weigh on the Democratic National Committee and other official party organs.

Republicans, frantic to catch up, are weighing a Catalist-like entity of their own, Data Trust, which would take the Republican National Committee's voter file, pile on commercial data, and swap voter information with increasingly powerful independent political committees like Karl Rove's Crossroads Grassroots Policy Strategies, better known as Crossroads GPS.

But Data Trust is hardly the only effort of its kind on the right. Billionaire conservative brothers David and Charles Koch are building their own list, known as Themis. And Adler, who sold his half of VAN in 2005 and retreated to his solar- and vegetable-oil-powered compound deep in the woods of Saunterstown ("I don't play well with other children," he says), is pushing a new, VoteBuilder-like product — rVotes — in conservative circles.

His slogan, playing on his history with VoteBuilder: "The best Campaign and Grass Roots software in the world for conservatives. Don't believe us? Ask your opponent."

Among rVotes' features: a tool that allows phone bank volunteers to log in from home and call a list of targeted voters similar to them in age or geography; a route-optimizer, available on handheld devices, that maps the most efficient walking path for door-knockers; and a patent-pending system that allows canvassers to jot down voter information on bar coded lists that can be instantly uploaded by scanner at campaign headquarters.

Adler approached the Republican National Committee in 2009 about adopting rVotes. But McKay, still in place as chief of staff, was "the only one smart enough to get it," he says. Republican state party chairmen around the country turned him down, too. But he isn't discouraged.

"They're wrong, I'm right," says Adler, who plans to build the system from the ground up in battleground states Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin — providing rVotes for free to lower-rung candidates, charging higher-profile candidates, and eventually forcing the Republican party apparatus to accept a system that, he insists, is far better than anything Data Trust or the Koch brothers will come up with.

That aggressive posture, though, will not be required in Adler's home state; Rhode Island's party chairman, unlike any of his colleagues nationwide, has bought into the new technology without reservation.

END GAME

McKay, sitting before an elephant print in his small, stripped-down office, says he wants to "implement the first [conservative] open voter file" in the nation.

His goal: to identify 275,000 fiscally conservative voters by the 2012 election and get them to the polls.

The hurdles to this effort are many: the GOP does not have the army of union activists and progressive canvassers that Rhode Island Democrats can draw upon. And raising money remains a struggle. But it is not merely a question of money and manpower.

Undergirding McKay's project is a true-believer's conviction that the GOP is offering a better product than the Democrats — a vision for smaller government and lower taxes that will ultimately resonate with a majority of voters, even in a blue state like Rhode Island.

"This is about a conservative way of life for America versus a liberal way of life for America," McKay says. "And if you boil it down to those arguments, we represent scores more voters than they do."

But this, Democratic operatives say, is where McKay's grand plan breaks down.

Rhode Islanders simply don't buy into Republican positions on the core economic or social issues, they argue. And no amount of computer wizardry can erase that. "When you get right down to it," says former Rhode Island Democratic Party chairman Bill Lynch, "there are some things you can't disguise."

Last year's election seems a case in point: amid an historic Republican wave nationwide, the GOP made only modest gains in the General Assembly and failed to win a single Congressional or statewide office.

And that failure came with rVotes, McKay's secret weapon, already partially deployed; Adler says roughly 70 Rhode Island GOP candidates, including all of those running for the top-tier offices, used the program last fall — even as the state party, itself, dithered.

But McKay says the voter file effort has only just begun. And Democrats, he argues, shouldn't be so certain they have the voters on their side anymore.

Just look at the headlines, he says. Providence and Central Falls are in dire fiscal shape. And the pension system's inadequacies are a source of considerable agita.

"I don't know where they shop," he says, of Democratic operatives, "but wherever I go, people are furious."

Still, Bob Walsh, executive director of the National Education Association-Rhode Island teachers union and longtime political player, says he just doesn't see some epochal shift in Rhode Island politics.

"Tough times bring folks together," he says, recalling the conservative paroxysm that followed the state's banking crisis in the early 1990s, "but it's temporary."

Rhode Island, he suggests, is still Rhode Island. And it's not just the state's values or ideology at issue here. As McKay himself acknowledges, breaking the bond between voter and Democratic incumbent in a state this small is a real challenge.

"In Rhode Island it's tough," he says. "We have these tiny districts and so people think, 'Well, I know the guy.' My position is if you know a person who is caucusing with [Senate President] Teresa Paiva Weed or

[Speaker of the House] Gordon Fox, then they are not for you, no matter how close they are to you, no matter how many years you spent in grammar school together."

That's a tough sell — especially with Fox and Paiva Weed playing against the Democratic caricature, this year, and forgoing the large sales tax expansion that Governor Lincoln Chafee proposed.

But if a full-scale revolution seems unlikely next year, particularly with President Obama atop the ticket and Democrats expected to go to the polls in large numbers, tough times could mean real moments of opportunity — here and there — for a well-organized GOP.

Freshman Democratic Congressman David Cicilline, former mayor of Providence, is reeling in the face of that city's fiscal meltdown and will be vulnerable when he seeks re-election next fall. And Governor Chafee, an independent, won a rather narrow victory in a four-way race last year and could hardly be considered a shoe-in come 2014.

If those races are close, as expected, route-optimized walking lists and a few hundred newly identified voters in the East Bay could make a difference.

Ken McKay's voter file may not bag the General Assembly and turn Rhode Island politics upside down. But a Congressional seat and the governor's office would be a nice little haul.

For full story, click [here](http://providence.thephoenix.com/news/122800-plan-to-turn-rhode-island-red/). [http://providence.thephoenix.com/news/122800-plan-to-turn-rhode-island-red/]