

COLUMNISTAS

In Black - and - White: A lackluster Convention fails to show the way forward.



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A hurricane threat, a shortened schedule, some botched scheduling and an audience that couldn't get excited in unison were just a few of the challenges that confronted the Republican Party's Convention that concluded this past week in Tampa, Florida.

The main purpose was to reintroduce Mitt Romney to the file and rank of his own party as well as to the wider national audience and to show that, besides business experience and his CEO approach to politics, the man is also human. With the help of Ann Romney, this was arguably accomplished. However, once humanized, the candidate had to convey a compelling message, a vision of the future that would sway the 8% undecided, and convert the anti-Obama into pro-Romney voters. In this, the Convention fell short.

His strategic efforts as a candidate in the Primary Election were dedicated to convincing the right wing of the Republican party that his ideas and values had "evolved" from his times of governor of Massachusetts: he is now pro-life and not pro-choice, and his signature health care reform for that state, based on an individual mandate, had very little resemblance to Obamacare. He succeeded then, but these ultra conservative positions alienated two fundamental blocs of voters he will need for the general election, namely, women and Latinos. Indeed, the gender gap puts Obama ahead, with 51% of women voting for Obama and 41% for Romney. The Latino voter gap is at 63% for Obama to 28% for Romney.

The campaign's political calculation was thus to use the Convention to appeal to the wider audience by showing the party's "diversity", by "humanizing" the candidate and by convincing the Evangelical right that being Mormon is not a monstrosity. Testimonials by members of his congregation, a convincing speech by Ann Romney and a black- and- white biographical video succeeded in meeting this goal. We learned that Mr. Romney is a wonderful husband and father, a patient man who tries to live by a set of values; that his years as head of a Mormon community were devoted to helping the needy, accompanying the lonely and counseling the troubled. It was also revealed that his tithing was uncommonly and consistently generous.

The Convention was carefully staged to show younger, more diverse GOP "rising stars" in order to bring into the fold some of still persuadable minorities. Paul Ryan, the Catholic, strictly anti- abortion 42-year old that completes the ticket, gave an ideological speech that charmed the older generation, with references to "central-planners" and direct attacks on Obama's "socialist" policies, using what could be described at best as half-truths. A great admirer of atheist right-wing writer Ayn Rand, Ryan, a Representative from Wisconsin, rose to fame this past year by presenting a budget plan that would lower taxes for the upper-income bracket, privatize Medicare and harshly restrict social programs. Portraying himself as a compassionate conservative, he is supposed to bring in the Catholic vote.

Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Florida Senator Marco Rubio used their personal stories aptly and were able to get two of the few electrifying moments of the Convention. Rice's appearance was important after a period of what seemed to be her retirement from politics; she talked optimistically about America, its unbound freedoms, its role as an underwriter of world order, and unquestionably, the land of exceptional opportunity: channeling Obama, she offered her story as a testament of these possibilities. In spite of growing up in the Jim Crow South, she rose to Secretary of State and here she was today, the first "stateswoman" of the Republican Party.

Rubio, a fresh-faced 41 year old and the son of working class Cuban immigrants, was the Latino version of the same idea. He had the difficult task of introducing Mitt Romney after the audience was still puzzled at Clint Eastwood's imaginary dialogue with President Obama (represented by an empty chair). After an awkward moment during which the seniors in the audience were still trying to process the meaning of Eastwood's sometimes off-color parody, Rubio managed the transition quite well and soon people were paying him undivided attention. One of the best-received portions was an anecdote about his father, who worked for years at a bar.

"He stood behind a bar in the back of the room all those years, so one day I could stand behind a podium in the front of a room," Rubio said, bringing in a huge applause. There were many of these "rag-to-riches" stories aimed at reassuring the viewers that the candidate's wealth is not an obstacle to Romney and Ryan's newly found empathic conservatism.

Mitt Romney's entrance along a cordoned red carpet, shaking hands and nodding to groups of supporters on each side, as well as the first few lines of his acceptance speech were shrewdly staged to evoke the State of the Union address. In line with the general theme, he devoted two thirds of his speech to his own biography and very little to the specifics of his economic agenda.

While conventions are seldom memorable affairs, and while this one is most likely going to be remembered by the bizarre spectacle of actor Clint Eastwood talking, at times incoherently, to an empty chair, there were other minor headlines running parallel to it that deserve more attention for what they reveal of the long-term GOP plan to re-take government.

Under the pretext that voter fraud is prevalent in presidential elections (a claim unsubstantiated by serious research), at least 14 Republican-dominated state legislatures, mostly (but not all) in the South, have been quietly passing new laws aimed at making the act of voting more difficult in those states. The intention is clear: to keep just enough demographic groups likely to vote for the Democrats (namely, young people and minorities) away from the polls.

This voter suppression strategy takes different forms, the most prevalent of which is requiring the presentation of government- issued photo IDs, such as a driver's license or a US passport, at the polls. It is a well-known fact that many elderly minorities and disabled citizens who don't drive lack these (Social Security cards in the US do not have photos, and there is not voting document such as a "credencial civica" in the US). These groups of people would have a hard time getting one, sometimes requiring them to travel miles away to get to the closest Public Safety office. In the case of young students, university-issued student identification cards for the most part are not accepted at the polls.

Other bills and rules were aimed at shortening early voting time frames, repealing Election Day registration laws, and preventing non-profit, non-partisan groups such as the League of Women Voters from organizing voter registration campaigns.

This week, however, a three-judge panel of the Federal District Court in Washington DC

struck down a Texas voter ID law. Two days earlier, a different three-judge panel for the same court found that, in its redrawing of the electoral-district map (a practice that takes place every ten years following a national Census), the Texas legislature had intentionally discriminated against minority voters

More important than any platform, more lasting than any emotional appeal to voters, voter suppression attempts constitute a politically divisive outrage that goes to the heart of our democracy. Indeed, it is unfathomable that over a century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Fifteenth Amendment, and half a century after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, minorities in the United States still have to rely on the court system to protect their right to vote.

In a presidential election year and with a race as tight as the one we are about to witness in two months, voter turnout is fundamental. Laws aimed at discouraging citizens to vote are a surreptitiously shrewd, anti-democratic way to ensure victory.