

# Will the GOP get rid of its conservatives, too?

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Is the national Republican leadership scared of its conservatives?

Many conservatives within the Democratic Party have found themselves searching for a home. Conservative Democrats are a historic reality. President Richard Nixon depended on southern Democrats or “Dixie-crats” to get his legislation through Congress.

In the 1980s, southern “Reagan Democrats” were more dependable for helping President Reagan push through conservative causes than were such northern Republicans as U.S. Senators Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania) and Olympia Snow (R-Maine).

Conservative Democrats have found themselves increasingly unwelcome in their party. But now, is the national Republican leadership also showing its conservatives the door?

“A Republican Party civil war is raging in the U.S., with conservatives dominating ever more primaries in a fight for the party’s soul,” writes Charles Babington for the Associated Press.

One leader of the GOP conservatives is South Carolina’s Senator Jim DeMint. He’s been surprised by the national Republican leadership’s seeming discomfort with his support of maverick, conservative candidates.

His Senate Conservatives Fund political action committee has spent nearly \$2 million from nearly 50,000 individual contributors nationwide and helped eight underdog conservative candidates win Republican primaries.

“DeMint’s mission is to bring more Jim DeMints to the Senate,” writes Steve Moore in the *Wall Street Journal*, “that is, people with an unfailing antagonism to big government. But his string of victories, often against establishment candidates, has many of his Republican colleagues grumbling.

Moore is the senior economics writer for the *Journal*’s editorial page. He says the Republican establishment is complaining that “DeMint is pushing candidates through the primaries who are too far to the right to take back vulnerable seats from Democrats in November.”

In fact, former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott recently spoke for many national Republican leaders when he said the GOP doesn’t need any more ‘Jim DeMint disciples.’”

However, it is noteworthy that Lott is a *former* Senator – out of a job, criticizing from the unemployment line. DeMint, on the other hand, is still in the Senate – and the candidates that he is backing are winning Republican primaries.

How can these maverick conservatives win against liberal Democrats in November? Political strategist Dick Morris says conservatives need to keep things simple. “There is no need this year to load up negative ads with adjectives painting your opponents as evil big spenders in the thrall of the Washington establishment.

“The simple facts of your opponents’ voting records are enough to defeat them.”

## Keep it simple

“Republican negative ad writers always delight in describing the stimulus package as ‘bloated, wasteful, government-growing and useless,’” writes Morris in a column co-authored by Eileen McGann. “The adjectives get in the way. The polling we’ve done indicates that the simple words ‘stimulus package’ convey all that and more.

“There is no need to call Obama’s health care legislation ‘a government attempt to take over our health care,’” advise Morris and McGann, “or a bill to ‘slash medical care for the elderly’ or an ‘attempt to force rationing of care.’ The simple word Obamacare conveys the same meanings.

“It is the beauty of the 2010 election year that ads that are prosaic, simple, straightforward and factual will do much better than those that are loaded up with negative adjectives and blood-dripping depictions of big-spenders who believe in big government.

“A simple ad along these lines will be far more effective for a Republican challenger to a Democratic incumbent than any elaborately conceived negative commercial:

“‘Do you support the \$850 billion stimulus package Obama passed last year? Joe Democrat voted yes. Harry Republican says no.

“‘The TARP bailout? Democrat voted in favor. Republican is opposed. Obamacare? Joe Democrat supported it. Harry Republican would have voted no.

“‘Cap and trade? Democrat yes, again. Republican, no. Vote for the one that agrees with you.’

“If you have to run a disclaimer featuring the candidate,” concludes Morris, “just end the ad up with: ‘I’m Harry Republican, and I approve of this ad to bring you the facts. Just the facts.’”

The dramatic swell of the Republican tide is becoming increasingly evident, he says. He is convinced that conservatives are going to win big.

## DeMint’s candidates are doing well

“Over the past five years,” observes Moore, “DeMint has established himself as the pre-eminent conservative in Congress – he has a near perfect National Taxpayer Union rating – with Tom Coburn of Oklahoma a close second.”

DeMint’s most recent victory was in Colorado where \$141,000 in radio ads and direct contributions helped Tea Party favorite but political unknown Ken Buck defeat Jane Norton, who was hand-picked by Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman John Cornyn of Texas.

DeMint says that Buck was never even presented to his colleagues as a “viable alternative, which seemed unfair.” He adds, only half-jokingly, according to Moore, that Norton was defeated by the fact that she was “endorsed by 25 Republican senators, which made her the establishment candidate.”

Other conservatives who DeMint has helped win include Rand Paul of Kentucky, Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and Mike Lee of Utah.

But do these newcomers have what it takes to beat established liberal Democrats?

“This is a ‘big change’ election,” says Republican strategist John Feehery. “If you are defending the establishment, you are in big trouble this time around.”

“Kentucky Senate nominee Rand Paul defied the Republican Party establishment,” writes Babington. “But many expect him to defeat Democrat Jack Conway in November. The dynamic is similar in Colorado. Senate nominee Ken Buck beat an establishment favorite in the Republican primary.”

Polls show him ahead of Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet.

In Connecticut, the Senate race appears tight between millionaire Republican newcomer Linda McMahon and Democrat Richard Blumenthal, the state's longtime attorney general.

DeMint says his goal is to raise \$5 million, which is a very small amount in national big-money politics. In Florida's Democratic primary alone, Senatorial candidate Jeff Greene spent \$25 million. He also lost.

DeMint is more careful. His strategic, targeted spending has won more races than even he thought possible.

"I'm not a kingmaker," he told Moore, who reports "even though that's precisely what many political professionals are calling him."

"These guys don't want to be kings," says DeMint. "We've got too many kings in Washington already."

Only a year ago, DeMint was demoralized by what was happening in Congress – as Obama shoved through health care reform and seemed intent on forcing ever-bigger government onto America.

### He almost gave up

DeMint considered not running for re-election, reports Moore. "Why do I want to beat my head against the wall for another six years?" he recalls thinking. "I called my wife in December and said I'm ready to give it up. I'm not making any headway and most of my own colleagues are against me up here. I don't even like playing a contentious role. I like to be a strategic policy guy."

After all, it's been lonely holding to conservative ideals in the current Congress.

When he launched budget battles, he found himself all by himself except for a very small group of fellow conservatives.

"There's Coburn, who has got the courage to go out and make a scene on the floor or to stand up in a conference meeting and stand up to the appropriators," says DeMint. "We don't have anyone else."

Recently, Coburn criticized Democrats, Republicans, Newt Gingrich, the military-industrial complex and teachers unions at a town hall meeting in Wagoner, Oklahoma, a small county seat near Tulsa.

"The real problem is that America is asleep," Coburn said. "I think this election they'll be more involved than they ever have been, and the reason is they're scared."

"The audience generally seemed to find comfort in the potential for a Republican takeover of Congress," wrote reporter Randy Krehbiel in the *Tulsa World* newspaper, "but Coburn warned that that alone would not necessarily yield the desired results."

"If the conservatives in Congress gain control and don't live up to expectations," Coburn told the crowd, "the Republican Party will be dead."

Coburn made it clear that he won't be on Newt Gingrich's 2012 presidential bandwagon.

Gingrich "is a super-smart man, but he doesn't know anything about commitment to marriage," he said of the thrice-married former House speaker. "He's the last person I'd vote for president of the United States. His life indicates he does not have a commitment to the character traits necessary to be a great president."

Coburn blasted health-care reform and said schools "are no longer about kids, they are about teachers' unions."

His cohort, DeMint, says the same frustrations prompted him to found his political action committee and support maverick candidates.

“When I got to Congress in 1999, instead of working on the reforms that I ran on – wealth-creating personal accounts and individually owned health insurance, the things that I thought all of us believed in – instead we worked on redistricting and getting the vulnerables on the right committees and getting earmarks to the people who needed them.

“Everything was about numbers and electing more Republicans. We’d always promise to get to the principles later.”

As DeMint describes the situation, he shakes his head: “I just thought maybe there’s something I don’t understand. I played along for a while. I asked for earmarks. I thought that following longtime South Carolina Senators Fritz Hollings and Strom Thurmond, part of my job was getting a fair share for South Carolina.

“But we spent most of each year directing appropriations for parochial projects and it undermined our brand as Republicans and our entire anti-big government agenda.”

In 2006 and 2007, while trying to raise funds for the official Republican Senate campaign committee, he realized that something was very wrong.

“I discovered that people were just so frustrated with the Republicans. I was over there at the Senate committee making fund-raising calls and so many people were saying, ‘I’m not giving you guys another dime until you start acting like Republicans.’”

## That hurt

“That’s when I got the idea of starting a committee to just help conservative candidates,” says DeMint. He says his frustration boiled over in 2009 when the Republican Senatorial Committee endorsed Arlen Specter and Charlie Crist. Today, both have left the Republican Party.

DeMint was the first major political figure to endorse young conservative Marco Rubio against Crist in Florida. Rubio is embraced now as a rising star of the Republican Party. However, when he was first endorsed by DeMint, nobody thought he had a chance.

“Many of my Senate colleagues weren’t too happy,” remembers DeMint, who also recalls a closed-door meeting with a number of Republican senators who wanted to look over Ron Johnson, a businessman and conservative seeking to run for the Senate from Wisconsin.

“He was asked why he’s running for Senate,” recalls DeMint. “He stood up, and I hadn’t met him yet. He looked straight at me and he said, ‘I just want to quote DeMint here. I’m coming here to join the fight, not the club.’”

DeMint supported firebrand challenger Joe Miller in Alaska’s Republican primary.

“It’s encouraging to me what happened in Alaska with Miller,” DeMint recently told Moore. “It should be a wake-up call to Republicans that politicians who go to Washington to bring home the bacon aren’t wanted – even in a state like Alaska that has gotten so much pork under senators like Ted Stevens. Voters are saying ‘We’re not willing to bankrupt the country to benefit ourselves.’”

That’s where DeMint says the battle line has been drawn within the Republican Party. Can conservatives survive in an environment in which Senators and Congressmen are expected to get as much federal money as possible to be spent back home in their districts.

Washington-based Republican adviser Kevin Madden says conservative voters are energized and will remain so through November, when many Democrats are likely to be dispirited.

Polls show non-establishment conservative candidates either ahead or in striking distance.

Established Republican leaders are doubtful.

However, DeMint says the survival of the nation depends on somebody saying “enough.” Enough spending. Enough borrowing. Enough deficit.

What should conservatives' top priority be should they manage to wrestle control of Congress away from the liberals in November?

"You need to start by putting a cap on spending," says DeMint. "We may not be able to repeal ObamaCare, but we can cut off the funding."

### Will the Republicans really dare?

Would they do such a thing? Defund Obamacare?

"Yes," says DeMint, "if you have a wave of new people coming in – they've all campaigned on it." Then, he says, sell Chrysler and GM. "It doesn't matter how much money we lose; let's get out of it."

"He also wants to privatize Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac," writes Moore, "so we can 'get out of running the housing industry.' He also wants to see a low-rate flat income or consumption tax.

"His other personal crusade is to end earmarks – pork-barrel spending.

"Mainstream America knows we need to stop," says DeMint. "I had a group of 400 pastors stand up and applaud when I said we've got to stop earmarks."

"They understand there is something immoral and corrupting about wasting taxpayer money," writes Moore.

DeMint says that Republican overspending and corruption is what that got them tossed out of power in the 2006 and 2008 Congressional elections.

"In the House, John Boehner and the Republicans get it," DeMint says.

He's not so sure about the Senate. "I think we're in danger of doing the same thing we did before, where a lot of young conservatives come in who have been out there campaigning on the right issues, but then all the senior guys take control of the committees and it's business as usual."

### That is dangerous, says DeMint

"This may be our last chance with voters, because if we're given the majority . . . and don't reform Washington, everybody is going to say, 'What's wrong with these guys? We need a third party.'"

He says he has more faith in American voters than in the politicians they send to Washington.

"I'm getting optimistic. I think, as I talk to people around the country – they seem to get it. They want a return to those things that made America different and great. They understand that what the government has done is so harmful, in terms of spending and takeovers, the debt, it has made people who are not normally political and not generally interested in it alarmed.

"What makes the difference for me is feeling like I'm really giving a voice to people who care about what happens to our country." That is why DeMint, for better or worse, has suddenly become a major political force.

A big conservative victory is almost certain, says Morris. "Right before Election Day, the numbers will get even better and presage an even larger Republican victory," he predicts. "Party trend usually indicates itself in the 10 days before an election when voters who do not typically follow politics closely tune in and decide for whom to vote.

"Until this window, they usually describe themselves to pollsters as 'undecided.' There will be a huge Republican party trend this year, but it hasn't happened yet. The huge Republican poll numbers these days do not reflect the last-minute switches typical of less involved voters," he writes.

The numbers mirror the nation's deep disappointment with Barack Obama, says Morris.

The ranks of these disaffected voters who are now turning against Obama and the Democrats will soon be joined by the less-involved voters who will come around in the week or 10 days before the election," writes Morris. "2010 is a year like no other in the magnitude of the partisan shift going on.

"It dwarfs 1994 and even 1974 in its order of magnitude.

"But we haven't yet seen the full impact of the last-minute party shift that will take place. Plenty of voters who are now undecided are yet to be heard from, and when they are, they will impact the results decisively.

"Most likely they will transform a massive Republican win into an even more massive victory."

However, the big question is whether the veteran Republicans running things will be bold enough to be conservative – and hang onto their victory.