



OPINION

Pragmatic Politics

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Nonprofits were alert and active on the days leading up to the national elections. Many were mobilizing people for voter registration, others for nonpartisan get-out-the-vote programs. Foundations put a large chunk of money into these nascent efforts toward enhancing the nation's democratic process.

Although it's laudable that nonprofits and foundations did more than ever to reach out to minority and low-income communities and connect them to the elections, something grave is missing from the moral compass of the nonprofit sector at this point in history. Evidence abounds of the willingness of the sector's leadership to follow its own version of Bill Clinton's recommended strategy of political triangulation—tacking to the center/right in order to curry favor with conservative voters or, in the case of nonprofits, conservative power brokers:

Elevating Rick Santorum: It's hard to believe that the nonprofit sector could play up to a political leader who eviscerates what he called "consensual sex" (he actually meant consensual sex between same-sex partners) by comparing gay relations to "man upon dog" interactions.¹ But pander to Pennsylvania's Republican junior senator they did, even to the point of a couple of nonprofit leadership PACs—including the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the American Society of Association Executives—funneling campaign contributions to the legislator. One hopes that they were not explicitly affirming Santorum's prehistoric attitudes on gays and lesbians. They simply turned a blind eye, choosing to focus on the senator's support for the nonitemizer tax deduction—which by itself is a losing proposition, from an economic efficiency perspective—and other charitable-giving incentives in the CARE Act.

With Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle's failed reelection bid, some nonprofit leaders—or their lobbyists—have anonymously chortled that the electorate had bulldozed the major Democratic roadblock stopping the nonitemizer from getting passed. Maybe the now ascendant Santorum and his Senate colleagues appear ready to move the legislation in the 109th Congress, perhaps as early as February or March. That Santorum



Rick Cohen

might reattach the discriminatory faith-based language that he so reluctantly pruned from the CARE bill passed by the Senate in 2003 drew no expressions of concern.

Even more tax cuts: Much like the soft endorse-

ments of Rick Santorum, a number of national leadership nonprofits—including Independent Sector, National Council of Nonprofit Associations, Council on Foundations and United Way of America—issued a letter to President Bush a mere six weeks before the election calling on him to attach the CARE Act's nonitemizer charitable deduction and the IRA charitable rollover provisions to a \$146 billion grab bag of corporate tax cuts. With an unfathomable calculus, they argued that these demonstrably paltry charitable benefits would outweigh the damage of still more debilitating federal tax cuts.

Maybe they thought that lauding the president's purported leadership of "the armies of compassion" in order to trade tax cuts for the CARE Act was simply pragmatic politics. Fortunately for them, the letter was released without fanfare. In pre-election caution, President Bush refused to accede for the moment to the call of the nonprofits and of conservatives in Congress. Though the corporate tax cuts, like every other Bush tax slash, eventually passed, the Velcro on the CARE bill failed to work.

Targeted IRS investigations: The nation's nonprofit leadership spoke out in defense of the NAACP as it faces an IRS investigation for the organization's exercise of free speech. The utterances that someone in the conservative firmament found so objectionable—criticizing the civil rights policies of the Bush administration—simply continue the core mission of the organization in its 90-year history: speaking out against the failure of every national administration to forthrightly address issues of racial discrimination and social inequities.

But the leadership didn't speak out against

the behavior of so many church leaders who, unlike the NAACP, brazenly endorsed political candidates from the pulpit and may themselves—appropriately—be under IRS investigation. Take, for example, the electioneering of the Westover Hills Church of Christ in Austin, Texas. In February 2004, Legacy PAC, a conservative group that supports anti-abortion candidates, held a political event at the church, using the church collection plates to raise a targeted \$5,000 for Republican candidates as the Texas Republican Party Chair and Party Treasurer exhorted the faithful to vote for Republican candidates, including George W. Bush.² Defending the PAC's use of the church for political fundraising was Republican National Committeeman Bill Crocker, suggesting that the PAC simply used the church (and its collection plate?), but the church itself wasn't involved.

Legacy PAC's church-based electioneering isn't all that unusual. Lots of conservative churches have gotten close to Republican PACs and politicians—even Jimmy Swaggart's television ministry endorsed the Christian Broadcasting Network's Pat Robertson for president with scant criticism from the IRS. This year, Jerry Falwell used his Jerry Falwell Ministries newsletter to endorse President Bush's reelection.

Is there a connection among our sector's obsequiousness with Santorum, its toying with tax giveaways for corporations, and its pandering to the religious right? We believe there is a big connection. National nonprofit leaders, who now softly express concern about the Iraq war and remind their peers that federal expenditures for services and infrastructure are important, somehow omit both taking on the venomous anti-gay and -lesbian sentiments that unfortunately overwhelmed much of the electorate and challenging corporations for their ability to run amuck through the federal budget.

Pragmatic politics in some views means soft-pedaling what the nonprofit sector should say about gay and lesbian civil rights, because some parts of the sector might not go along. Look at *The Chronicle of Philanthropy's* post-election issue, which includes interviews with 21 sector leaders on the election; not one said a word about the potential role of foundations, much less the entire nonprofit sector, in countering the conservative's rancorous, malicious campaign against gays and lesbians. Defending the rights of a huge portion of the American populace might offend some conservative-leaning nonprofits and foundations or, worse, Sen. Santorum, whose support is needed to push the nonitemizer tax deduction through Congress.

Pragmatic politics in some circles means downplaying concerns about the increasing unfettered corporate domination of our society. Some portion of corporate tax credits might make their way into nonprofit coffers, so better not to say anything bad about corporations. Some pro-corporate legislation, such as \$146 billion in tax cuts, might serve as a vehicle for charitable-incentives legislation, so be careful not to offend corporate philanthropic partners.

The fact that the nonprofit sector's leadership can be so easily and cheaply bought is almost as obscene as Santorum's comments about gay and lesbian relationships. This version of pragmatic politics displayed by much of the nonprofit sector's leadership did nothing to advance a progressive social justice agenda very far in November. Now is the time for the nonprofit sector—the bulk of which should be connected to social justice and full democracy—to rediscover a voice that is clear and strong and forthright. Tacking and triangulating to play up to some of these political leaders for short-term sector gains at the sacrifice of core principles of fairness and equity in our society—and transparency and accountability in our sector—aren't pragmatic politics. They're a losing proposition that feeds directly into the right's strategy of silencing and controlling its opponents. ○

Notes

1. "Sen. Rick Santorum's comments on homosexuality in an AP interview," April 23, 2003.
2. "IRS Urged to Investigate Austin Church for Holding Republican Fund-Raiser: Watchdog Group Seeks Action From Federal Tax Agency Against Westover Hills Church Of Christ" (March 12, 2004, press release from Americans United for Separation of Church and State).

Rick Cohen is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). NCRP is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1976 by nonprofit leaders across the nation who recognized that traditional philanthropy was falling short of addressing critical public needs. NCRP's founders encouraged foundations to provide resources and opportunities to help equalize the uneven playing field that decades of economic equality and pervasive discrimination had created. Today NCRP conducts research on and advocates for philanthropic policies and practices that are responsive to public needs. For more information on NCRP or to join, please visit www.ncrp.org, call (202) 387-9177 or use the enclosed membership form.