

One Reason Conservatives Are Losing?

In November 2012, I attended a conservative State Policy Network (SPN) conference the week after President Obama had won reelection.

As you might imagine, the mood among the conservative think-tank attendees was rather somber. In spite of all their efforts over the past four years, the more liberal presidential candidate had defeated the more conservative candidate.

Now, one thing to understand is that most of the conservative think tanks lead with the term “freedom” in their missions and visions. They see freedom as the preeminent founding idea of America and the source of its exceptionalism, and they exist in large part to promote freedom in all its manifestations—the free market, free enterprise, individual freedom, etc.

The stated conclusion among the speakers at that SPN conference was that “freedom” was still a winning idea, *but that it just needed to be messaged better to the American public*. In subsequent years I’ve heard much from conservative think tanks about how freedom simply needs to be sold to Americans through clever campaigns, content, and their favorite new word, “storytelling.” Through the art of persuasion, they believe, Americans will come to value freedom more and elect the conservative candidates who use it as a mantra.

Here’s a piece of messaging advice to conservatives: from a political perspective, I think “freedom” is a bad message.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not arguing with the idea of freedom. (Who would?) I’m simply arguing that “freedom” is not a message that’s going to pull at the heartstrings of many

contemporary Americans.

The reason is that “freedom” is an abstraction. And, as John Henry Newman pointed out over a hundred years ago, people are moved by the concrete rather than the abstract:

“It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract... [W]hat is concrete exerts a force and makes an impression on the mind which nothing abstract can rival.”

Now, if the abstraction of “freedom” were more rooted in the concrete, day-to-day experiences of most Americans today, then the conservatives might have something.

But here’s the thing: most people in America don’t really feel that enslaved. In general, [they feel pretty free](#). Conservatives may argue (rightly, in some cases) that certain freedoms that were enjoyed in the past are now slowly disappearing. But I don’t think we’ve yet reached a tipping point where most Americans are regularly conscious of this in their lives.

Even if they don’t see threats to it, should they be thankful for this freedom and seek diligently to preserve it? Sure. But alas, gratitude tends to go by the wayside in wealthy countries, and most Americans today have not experienced some of the immanent threats to freedom that loomed large for their fellow citizens in the past. Freedom may very well be “never more than one generation away from extinction.” But historically, that’s usually been a truth recognized only in retrospect.

The fact is, most people are moved not by lofty, abstract ideals, but by issues that concretely impact the small spheres in which they experience life. Until more conservatives understand this, they’ll probably have a difficult time winning a national election.