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The collapse of the Republicans' small tent

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This should have been our year, Republicans keep muttering to themselves. And by many historical measures, it indeed should have been: polarized politics, a struggling economy, unemployment still too high.

But the right decided it could build a very small tent and somehow cram enough votes into it to win the presidency and take control of the Senate. It didn't happen: African-Americans, Latinos and young voters were all a greater proportion of the electorate this year than even in 2008. Women played a huge role, too -- the shrinking gender gap did not come through. It all left Republicans as the party of rich white voters trying to stop a demographic tide by simply yelling "Hey you!" over and over again.

Yes, the GOP retained control of the House (though by fewer seats). But the House has become the home of small-tent politics. Redistricting has made most areas safe for the incumbent; there is no need to build a wider tent. But in the Senate, where statewide races require moderate candidates who can create coalitions (like a presidential campaign is supposed to do), the news was very bad for the GOP. Sure victory after sure victory collapsed -- cranky, Neanderthal candidates who delivered unseemly diatribes about rape and fertility were buried under their own bizarre monologues. Solidly red states like Indiana went Democratic in the Senate, and the party's majority there actually increased.

Across the country, ballot initiatives favoring marriage equality passed. Here in California, voters approved a measure to increase their own taxes to shrink the state deficit and stop the cutting of education budgets. And Democrats here won a supermajority in the state legislature: two-thirds in both houses, immune now to any parliamentary gimmicks by the GOP -- this in a state that was until the late '90s the home to a strong Republican party, led by the legacy of Ronald Reagan.

But the tent kept getting smaller. Women were not welcome, and their health issues deserved only scorn.

Latino immigrants were pressured to "self-deport" and everyone was asked to applaud more tax cuts for the rich.

The small tent did grow in one respect: the Catholic hierarchy shoved its way in, trying to find a bit of room for itself inside the dusty carnival canvas. Obama won the Catholic vote again this year, though by a smaller margin and carried by Latino votes. Remarkable, given the leadership campaign against the president that gave Fox News a run for its money when it came to distortion and half-truths.

Look again, though -- Obama won the Catholic vote on the strength of Latinos. Where is the church growing in America? Latinos. Who are among the church's most reliable and loyal volunteers, workers, advocates on the parish level? Women, another source of Democratic voting strength.

That small-tent approach did not work for the GOP. It won't work any better for the church, either.

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