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House Republicans Weigh Direction: Seek Center, or Stay Right?

By SARAH LUECK
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WASHINGTON -- House Republicans met Tuesday to plot strategy for the election year and found themselves facing a dilemma that cuts to the heart of the party's future: In a year when Republicans are expected to lose a number of House seats, should lawmakers tack right to energize their conservative base, or should they strike a centrist tone in an appeal to independents?

Since losing their third-consecutive special election last week, Republicans have begun their soul-searching in earnest, a rapid turnaround for a party that just two years ago appeared to have a vise-like grip on the levers of power in Congress.

The Republican Study Committee, a group of conservative House members, unveiled Tuesday a plan under the title "bold, simple and different than the Democrats." It calls for an end to earmarks, a simpler tax code and the prohibition of minors from being transported across state lines for an abortion without parental consent.

- **What's News:** House Republicans are unveiling numerous proposals about how best to win elections.
- **What's the Issue:** Individual lawmakers differ over whether a centrist or conservative approach will put them in a better position.
- **What's Next:** As John McCain becomes a more prominent face of the party, Republicans want to figure out how to capitalize on his popularity without alienating conservatives.

A more moderate "Suburban Agenda" ("Our Families, Our Communities, Our Commitment"), presented by Rep. Mark Kirk (R., Ill.) and the Suburban Agenda Caucus, proposes tax incentives aimed at getting families to save for education

and encouraging employers to fund mass transit for workers. It steers clear of abortion, much to the relief of the dwindling number of social-issue moderates in the House.

On Wednesday, House Republican leaders will start rolling out their formal agenda ("Change America Deserves"), with a focus on energy

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proposals, such as expanded use of nuclear energy, renewable-fuel sources and domestic drilling.

"I think the way back to the majority is to the right," Rep. Mike Pence (R., Ind.) said he told his colleagues during the closed-door Tuesday meeting. He endorsed the RSC plan, as well as the leadership's plan.

He also noted the views of Sen. John McCain, the likely Republican presidential nominee, which were laid out in a speech to conservatives earlier this year: Win the war, make President Bush's tax cuts permanent and secure the nation's borders, among others. "He's our standard bearer," Mr. Pence said.

Rep. Bob Inglis (R., S.C.) is also a conservative, but he is urging his colleagues to find new ways to reach out to independent voters. Mr. Inglis interprets the role of Mr. McCain in a different light -- a self-styled "risk taker" at the top of the ticket.

On Monday, Mr. Inglis rolled out his own "action plan" (slogan: "America Wins") at Tommy's Ham House in Greenville, S.C., to an audience of about 30 constituents. Mr. Inglis doesn't support drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a departure from the agenda of his fellow RSC colleagues. Such legislation doesn't have the necessary votes to get through Congress, he says, and there might be a chance to broach a compromise solution if both parties put such "nonstarter" issues aside.

"It works well to stand on the partisan rhetorical wall and shout. You can raise money, you can get a standing ovation at the county party convention. But you surely won't win back control of the House," Mr. Inglis said. "The first party that gets off the partisan wall and into a solution orientation wins."

Mr. Inglis's approach risks alienating diehard conservatives who have been his strong supporters -- and he acknowledged some of his audience in Greenville disagreed with him, especially on the question of drilling in the policy.

Glenn Barnes, a 77-year-old Greenville resident, says he "wore out a good job" when he first ran for the House in 1992. But this week, "the main issue that came up was the answer I got."

Mr. Barnes said he, too, thinks Republicans need to win back independent voters and change our principles in order to do that. "He'll still vote for Mr. Inglis in the future," he said, including a strong opposition to abortion.

Republicans leaving Tuesday's meeting downplayed their differences and said they would continue to air their views. Indeed, it's possible this year that individual lawmakers will be elected based on the makeup of their home districts, a shift from the past when the

Some involved in crafting the leadership agenda said the conservatives' plan honored that Peter, Paul and Mary are covering my song," said Thaddeus M. meeting.

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