

Rebuilding the Brand

The GOP's governors wearily assess the 2008 fallout

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The sun-drenched waterfront hotel in Miami is glitzy, with swaying palms out front and a glittering fountain in the lobby. But the mood inside Wednesday was dark, as the Republican governors Association gathered to try to rebuild a brand badly tarnished at the polls.

Yes, the GOP's governors can rightly claim a better track record than their ticketmates in the presidential and congressional races earlier this month. And their ranks do boast a genuine rock star in Alaska's Sarah Palin, the vice presidential sensation who all but incited a riot when she ambled from behind a curtain set up in the hotel's mezzanine to make her way from an interview with Larry King to the elevator bank. (Perhaps because of the crushing stampede that followed Palin wherever she went, the Alaska governor largely kept a low profile on the opening day of the conference, skipping most events).

But those truths offered cold comfort to the largely weary crowd. At a panel discussion Wednesday of what went wrong in the 2008 campaign and the implications for the party's image, the tone was often surprisingly negative, especially for a public forum. Pollster and panel moderator Frank Luntz explained the rationale: "Normally when I do these presentations it is done in private, but the [Republican governors] wanted the American people to know that they understand what happened in this election and this is the beginning, not the end." Luntz didn't mince words, telling the crowd that he felt like assisted-suicide doctor Jack Kevorkian "at an AARP convention" and reminding the party faithful that taken together, the 2006 midterms and the 2008 elections marked the GOP's worst back-to-back performance since 1930 and '32. "We have to be honest with ourselves," Luntz said, "and quite honestly things are really tough right now."

There was also plenty of envy over Barack Obama's technological edge. "Understand what he has at his disposal: 10 million names," Luntz said. "It makes him and his supporters the most powerful special-interest group in all of America ... We've never had a situation where so many people are so active and so engaged and they can be reached by the stroke of a key." Meanwhile, Luntz said, the GOP nominee didn't know how to use a Blackberry. "There's a generational problem the Republican Party is going to have to address," he said, launching into a slideshow with titles such as "Voters Don't Think You Have Delivered," "What Were You Thinking?" and "The Problem: Throw the Bums Out!" Luntz wasn't the only one on stage to underscore the significance of the Web. When asked what he believes the most important initiative for Republicans to undertake going forward might be, National Review writer Byron York said it is imperative that party leaders get a better understanding of the Internet and its political applications.

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