

## **Op-Ed Columnist**

### **Makers, Takers, Fakers**

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Republicans have a problem. For years they could shout down any attempt to point out the extent to which their policies favored the elite over the poor and the middle class; all they had to do was yell “Class warfare!” and Democrats scurried away. In the 2012 election, however, that didn’t work: the picture of the G.O.P. as the party of sneering plutocrats stuck, even as Democrats became more openly populist than they have been in decades.

Governors Push Bigger Reliance on Sales Taxes (January 25, 2013)

As a result, prominent Republicans have begun acknowledging that their party needs to improve its image. But here’s the thing: Their proposals for a makeover all involve changing the sales pitch rather than the product. When it comes to substance, the G.O.P. is more committed than ever to policies that take from most Americans and give to a wealthy handful.

Consider, as a case in point, how a widely reported recent speech by Bobby Jindal the governor of Louisiana, compares with his actual policies.

Mr. Jindal posed the problem in a way that would, I believe, have been unthinkable for a leading Republican even a year ago. “We must not,” he declared, “be the party that simply protects the well off so they can keep their toys. We have to be the party that shows all Americans how they can thrive.” After a campaign in which Mitt Romney denounced any attempt to talk about class divisions as an “attack on success,” this represents a major rhetorical shift.

But Mr. Jindal didn’t offer any suggestions about how Republicans might demonstrate that they aren’t just about letting the rich keep their toys, other than claiming even more loudly that their policies are good for everyone.

Meanwhile, back in Louisiana Mr. Jindal is pushing a plan to eliminate the state’s income tax, which falls most heavily on the affluent, and make up for the lost revenue by raising sales taxes, which fall much more heavily on the poor and the middle class. The result would be big gains for the top 1 percent, substantial losses for the bottom 60 percent. Similar plans are being pushed by a number of other Republican governors as well.

Like the new acknowledgment that the perception of being the party of the rich is a problem, this represents a departure for the G.O.P. — but in the opposite direction. In the past, Republicans would justify tax cuts for the rich either by claiming that they would pay for themselves or by claiming that they could make up for lost revenue by cutting wasteful spending. But what we’re seeing now is open, explicit reverse Robin Hoodism: taking from ordinary families and giving to the rich. That is, even as Republicans look for a way to sound more sympathetic and less extreme, their actual

policies are taking another sharp right turn.

Why is this happening? In particular, why is it happening now, just after an election in which the G.O.P. paid a price for its anti-populist stand?

Well, I don't have a full answer, but I think it's important to understand the extent to which leading Republicans live in an intellectual bubble. They get their news from Fox and other captive media, they get their policy analysis from billionaire-financed right-wing think tanks, and they're often blissfully unaware both of contrary evidence and of how their positions sound to outsiders.

So when Mr. Romney made his infamous "47 percent" remarks, he wasn't, in his own mind, saying anything outrageous or even controversial. He was just repeating a view that has become increasingly dominant inside the right-wing bubble, namely that a large and ever-growing proportion of Americans won't take responsibility for their own lives and are mooching off the hard-working wealthy. Rising unemployment claims demonstrate laziness, not lack of jobs; rising disability claims represent malingering, not the real health problems of an aging work force.

And given that worldview, Republicans see it as entirely appropriate to cut taxes on the rich while making everyone else pay more.

Now, national politicians learned last year that this kind of talk plays badly with the public, so they're trying to obscure their positions. Paul Ryan, for example, has lately made a transparently dishonest attempt to claim that when he spoke about "takers" living off the efforts of the "makers" — at one point he assigned 60 percent of Americans to the taker category — he wasn't talking about people receiving Social Security and Medicare. (He was.)

But in deep red states like Louisiana or Kansas, Republicans are much freer to act on their beliefs — which means moving strongly to comfort the comfortable while afflicting the afflicted.

Which brings me back to Mr. Jindal, who declared in his speech that "we are a populist party." No, you aren't. You're a party that holds a large proportion of Americans in contempt. And the public may have figured that out.

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