The Cost of Radical Anti-Tax Rhetoric

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Posted: 7/10/11 02:00 PM ET

Opposition to almost all taxes has been the defining characteristic of the Republican Party for several decades. At least as far back as the late 1970s, the Republican Party has identified cutting taxes as the key to solving almost any economic problem. For Republican ideologues the best way to stimulate the economy, create jobs, balance the budget, bring people out of poverty, improve education, develop a better health care system or virtually anything else has, for some time now, been to cut taxes.

This has been an important part of the Republican Party's electoral appeal, and indeed message, for most of this time. Most people don't like paying taxes; and it is not hard to convince people that they are taxed too heavily, despite the ample evidence to the contrary. Similarly, in a country as large and complex as the U.S., it is never difficult to find government and bureaucratic waste to use as "proof" that tax dollars are being wasted.

For more than a generation, Republican candidates for almost every office have campaigned on the need to cut taxes and have successfully intimidated the Democratic Party into keeping silent regarding the need for taxes in a modern state. This anti-tax rhetoric has contributed to the current debt problems facing the U.S. as decades of increased spending while reducing taxes, including during periods when the borrow-and-spend Republicans were in power, have put the U.S. deep in the red. That the result of cutting taxes and increasing spending is increased deficits should come as a surprise to nobody, but nonetheless demonstrates the danger of the extreme anti-tax position of the Republican Party.

During the last two or three years, the Republican Party has sought to link their anti-tax sentiment to concern about the debt and an attempt to present themselves as the party of fiscal responsibility. The latter effort has occurred despite the massive debt which was created, and largely ignored by Republican policy makers, during the presidency of George W. Bush. The current negotiations around the debt ceiling have demonstrated once again that Republican concerns about the debt end when any discussion about raising taxes begins. President Obama's proposed deal features enormous concessions to the Republicans, but it will not win Republican support because it also calls for slight tax increases.

Obama's penchant for compromise, often as a good in of itself, rather than as a means of achieving a policy goal, has angered progressives who believe the President is giving away too much to the Republicans. However, Obama's offer has also put the Republican congressional leadership in the position of either convincing their more radical members to support a proposal like Obama's or concede that the Republican Party has become, on
economic issues, little more than a cheering squad for tax cuts with no ability to govern, even when they stand to win.

The most recent demonstration of anti-tax fanaticism by the Republican Party may present an opportunity for the Democrats, and even become something of a liability for the Republican Party. While calling for tax cuts remains a reliably winning campaign tactic, current Republican actions demonstrate more clearly than ever how the anti-tax view of that party undermines their ability to govern and exposes the hypocrisy of their alleged concern over the deficit. If the Republicans reject a debt ceiling deal that tilts far more heavily towards spending cuts than revenue increases, it will make it clear to voters that the Party is not serious about reducing the debt, but sees that as secondary to fighting taxes.

The Republicans have been successful running on anti-tax platforms for years, but in 2012 they will have to run on a position that cutting taxes is such an extreme priority, on which there can be no flexibility, that it is even more important than addressing the other issues which, the Republicans themselves, have said threaten the future of our country. At its core, the anti-tax agenda of the Republican Party has always been about shifting wealth from the poor and middle class to the wealthy, but it will be more difficult to conceal this if the Republicans continue their inflexibility on the need to increase revenue to address long term U.S. fiscal problems.

For several years, the Republicans have sought to convince the American people that the debt is the biggest economic problem facing the U.S.. This may or may not be true, but enough Americans believe it now that the Republicans may face electoral consequences if they continue to eschew any compromise on the debt ceiling that includes any efforts to increase revenue. It is possible to believe that cutting taxes is always the right thing to do; and it is easy to point to the debt as an enormous problem facing the U.S., but doing both at the same time, as the Republicans have tried to do, is becoming increasingly less possible.