

By Senator Bill Brady

For the voters, thankfully it's over.

But they delivered a message loud and strong throughout Illinois.

They gave both traditional political parties a strong dose of straight talk. More than any election in recent memory, they conveyed more disgust and begrudging support for their candidates than they did enthusiasm -- for either the candidates or the process.

While the candidates demonized each other, their agendas were lost in an unprecedented barrage of negative ads. Voters responded in kind; they lost interest, stayed home or turned their backs on their traditional political allegiances, even to the point of giving 10 percent of their vote in the gubernatorial election to the Green Party -- which for many voters simply meant "none of the above."

For my Republican Party, the voters' message was particularly widespread and unquestionably potent -- show us something we can believe in.

What happened? We could argue that Republicans were the victims of a national tide of voter discontent over the Iraq War -- and some numbers would back us up. We could point to the power of Democratic incumbency in statewide contests -- and technically we would be right. But the truth is that, but for a few exceptions, Illinois Republicans lost this year because we failed to offer value to the voter. Now the Illinois Republican Party must begin an ongoing and arduous effort to reach out, recruit, recover and rebuild.

For a party that has won only one statewide race in six years, for a party that lost six seats in the Illinois Senate and House this fall, for a party that lost county board seats in areas once considered staunchly Republican, for a party whose out-of-state candidate for the U.S. Senate lost by a record margin two years ago, clearly we Republicans must get back to the basics.

Ronald Reagan once said he didn't leave the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party left him. I know many Republicans -- and probably some Democrats too -- are thinking along the same line today.

Voters need a reason to invest their time and interest in their party. They need a reason to belong. They need a reason to call themselves Republicans once again.

I believe Republican leaders must go back to the people to bring the people back to the party. And what are people asking for? A bold vision, sound principles and reasoned action.

Tomorrow's Republican Party leaders must respect and stay true to mainstream conservative values, but they must work to find common ground that unites people.

Tomorrow's Republican leaders must be ethically pure, untainted by even the perception of corrupt behavior. Tomorrow's Republican leaders must put forward ideas that connect directly to citizens and their daily lives. They must articulate ideas that ignite the imagination of Illinoisans and invite their respect.

We must launch ongoing efforts and internal reforms if we are ever to bring any shade of red back to the political hue of Illinois. We can start by giving Republican primary voters the right to elect their party officials. We can demand that party leaders who divide rather than unite step aside. We must move beyond the blindness of the old guard to the promise of energetic new leaders with innovative new ideas.

We must speak to the future, for without a clear vision for this great state, we stand for nothing. Without a respect for the values that made Illinois strong, we fail. Without inspiring confidence and welcoming all, we risk truly being irrelevant.

Once the party of Lincoln and Reagan, the Republican Party must reclaim its voice as a party of compassion, free enterprise, fiscal restraint, personal responsibility and common sense.

The past is past, and we should learn from it. It indeed will take a new generation of leadership in the Republican Party to successfully bring Republican and independent voters back to our ranks.

Offering value and vitality, we must reach out. With confidence and conviction, we must move forward.

-- A Republican from Bloomington, Sen. Bill Brady has served in the Illinois Senate since 2002 and was a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor in the March primary election. He previously served in the Illinois House of Representatives for eight years.