Will Romney loss change relationship between GOP, tea party?

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During the GOP presidential primary season of 2011-12, members of local tea parties and other conservative coalitions heard Mitt Romney utter positions that were music to their ears.

He spoke of shrinking government and cutting taxes. He said he wanted to see Roe v. Wade overturned. He suggested that life could be made so unlivable for illegal immigrants that they would practice self-deportation. He opposed same-sex marriage. And, previously a moderate, he labeled himself a “severe conservative.”

While the tea parties concentrate on economic issues, many of their members also hold those conservative positions on social issues. Local tea party members say they worked hard to get Romney the GOP nomination.

But Romney lost to President Barack Obama, and many pundits proclaimed that it was the far-right positions Romney spouted during the primaries that came back to defeat him. The tea parties, which powered the GOP takeover of the U.S. House in 2010, suddenly were albatrosses around the neck of the GOP, those pundits figured.

The question arises: What will the future relationship between the GOP and tea parties be?

“It is hard to see a future for conservatism,” said Palm Beach County GOP Chairman Sid Dinerstein when he announced his retirement after the election. “It does not exist in Europe, or California. It is no longer welcome in America. The Republican Party will have to take a good look in the mirror and decide what, if any, future it has.”

Local tea party activists and their allies disagree, although they admit that they need some time to assess the election results.

“People are still sorting it out,” said Fred Scheibl of the Palm Beach County Tea Party. “A lot of people are saying this is the end of the conservative movement, but what we have done is maintain the status quo. The Democrats have the White House and the Senate, but the
Republicans still have the House. In 2010, we put the brakes on Obama, and the Republicans in the House can still do that.”

He attributed Obama’s victory to the Democrats’ “superb ground game” and not necessarily the positions Romney took.

Romney himself recently attributed his loss to “financial gifts” that Obama gave to Democratic voting blocs: the forgiving of student loan interest; free contraceptives for women; and the biggest “gift” of all, the Affordable Care Act. Many leading Republicans rejected Romney’s language as insulting.

Shannon Armstrong of South Florida 912, a conservative coalition based in Palm Beach County, agreed that Obama was successful at reaching certain groups.

“Obama was very good at explaining where he stood, and the Democrats were good at targeting different racial and ethnic groups,” said Armstrong. “I thought Romney’s messaging was good, but I didn’t see the level of organization by the GOP that the Democrats had.”

No big change expected

Pam Wohlschlegel, Palm Beach County Tea Party president, said she does not believe that the game plan of her organization needs much adjusting.

“I don’t think it’s going to change dramatically,” she said. “We will still work for limited government, fiscal responsibility and free markets, and our oversight of elected officials will not end.”

She attributed Romney’s defeat to “the liberal media,” which she said favored Obama and did not accurately reflect Romney’s positions.

But some political observers say the election results show that the relationship between the GOP and the tea party must be transformed.

“I think the Republicans probably will change the dynamic,” said Sean Snaith, a political commentator at the University of Central Florida. “In 2010, the tea party took the outrage some people felt about the Affordable Care Act and helped the GOP take over the House, but by the election this year they were seen as a liability.”

The reason, Snaith said, were those conservative positions on social issues pushed by the far right, such as a GOP platform that opposed abortion even in cases of rape and incest.

“In the primary season you have to take positions that appeal to the base,” Snaith said. “A Republican candidate has to appeal to coalitions that hold views that Middle America doesn’t embrace. If you want a candidate who can win a national election, you can’t pick someone who embraces every belief you hear on conservative talk radio.”
Immigration compromise?

“You have to start moving toward the middle or you are going to keep losing elections. … Fiscal conservatism can remain the central plank for the Republicans, the need for fiscal prudence, but you can’t let the opposition define you on social issues,” Snaith said.

One place to start is by the GOP compromising on immigration overhaul with the Democrats, he and other political observers said. Obama has said he will present an immigration bill early in the next Congress.

“You can identify the weapons that were used against you this last election and start taking them off the table,” Snaith said. Obama won the Hispanic vote 79 percent to 21 percent, with the GOP hard-line stance on immigration seen as a major liability.

But that is changing. GOP House Speaker John Boehner has said comprehensive immigration reform is a priority, and conservative media star Sean Hannity has done a 180-degree turn since the election and also backs such reform. Locally, Scheibl of the tea party and Armstrong of South Florida 912 see a possibility of middle ground. They speak of strengthening border security and deporting criminal aliens — which the Obama administration already is doing. They see a possible solution that would identify and register law-abiding, working illegal immigrants and end chronic illegal immigration. Scheibl said he would back guest-worker visas.

Candidates the tea party supports can’t continue to alienate Hispanics by spouting anti-immigrant rhetoric, Scheibl said.

“We can’t be cutting out a segment of the population,” Scheibl said. “We need to take a message from Ronald Reagan and have something to offer everyone.”

Solution won’t be easy

But Kevin Wagner, a Florida Atlantic University political scientist, said it may be difficult to get many tea partyers to compromise on such a core issue as immigration, no matter what Scheibl said.

“The Republicans certainly do need to adapt to the changing demographic and not alienate Hispanics,” Wagner said. “But what you hear out of tea party members in South Florida on immigration where we have a lot immigrants is different than what you would hear out of tea party members in Arkansas.”

Wagner said there is a strong “nativist” strain in the tea party, especially in the South. Nativism is a policy of protecting the interests of native-born people over those of immigrants.

Positions against abortion and same-sex marriage may be even harder to change, he said.

“There are very conservative districts in the South where not appealing to those very conservative positions will get you killed in the primary so you don’t even reach the general
election,” Wagner said. “Congressmen aren’t about to sacrifice their careers to serve the interests of the national party.”

Nova Southeastern University political scientist Charles Zelden said the GOP should expect a fight if it tries to get the tea parties and other conservative groups to abandon any of their core positions.

“It will depend how the two elements respond,” he said. “The GOP could interpret the election results as a repudiation of the tea parties and push them away. The tea parties could turn around and say ‘the problem wasn’t us, it’s that Mitt Romney wasn’t conservative enough. And we’ll run our people against your people and beat you the way we have shown we can do already.’ How they work this out or don’t work it out will be very interesting to watch.”