

Why It's Time For Conservatives To Use Pop-Culture Messaging



Throughout the presidential campaign, conservatives regularly chided President Obama for ducking media venues where he would likely be asked substantive questions about serious issues. He ignored their criticism and spent his time sharing his iPod playlist with MTV, calling morning zoo deejays on local radio stations, and

basking in the fawning adulation of the ladies of *The View* and David Letterman.

It seemed undignified for a sitting president to so regularly present himself as a celebrity rather than a leader, and let's face it...It was (and it continues to be). Yet, there was a method to the madness that went beyond Obama just wanting public exposure without having to answer questions about the economy and Benghazi. He understood a reality that many conservatives found themselves not prepared to accept during a time of grossly incompetent leadership and deep economic turmoil: Even when the country's on fire, there is a large, unengaged portion of the American public that hasn't a clue what's really going on around them. And sadly, *they* are the ones who ultimately decide elections.

These people don't get their news from news organizations or even propaganda arms posing as such. They live in the microcosms of their own personal lives and *absorb* their news from whatever over-simplified messages happen to trickle down to them through the pop culture world. Thus, they often fail

to draw a link between the challenges they face in life and the decisions being made by their elected leaders. They base their vote not on ideology or issues, but rather the candidate they find the most personally appealing.

So, as much as many of us mocked the president for weaseling out of situations where he would be challenged, it's hard to deny that the strategy paid off for him. And really, it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise. Celebrities have always transcended politics.

People like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, and Al Franken had no previous political experience prior to winning top offices in state-wide elections. In Schwarzenegger's case, he was able to win as a Republican in one of the country's most liberal states – not because of anything he said or did on the campaign trail, but because he was *The Terminator*. There was recently a lot of buzz behind the idea of actor Ben Affleck running for the open U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts, merely because in recent interviews, he's demonstrated a level of political knowledge equal to that of the average basement blogger.

There is unearned yet immense power that comes with being a pop-culture figure. Being a celebrity is a tremendous advantage when it comes to connecting with the public. People are always more instinctively inclined to throw their support behind someone whose work they recognize and enjoy, even if that work is fairly meaningless to their lives.

A big problem for conservatives, when it comes to pop-culture, is that Hollywood has long been hostile to their ideology. Conservatives are often the villains in their movies, the targets of mockery in their television shows, and the recipients of their award-ceremony, self-righteous censures. Thus, the Republican Party has long steered clear of that branch of the media, electing instead to fight exclusively on battlegrounds where substance is valued over style.

That needs to change.

With an American public that is unengaged now more than ever when it comes to real, serious issues that affect their lives and their futures, conservatives can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines when it comes to environments that make them uncomfortable. People on the right often talk about how they need to take a more important role in combating the liberal influence of college professors and other academics pushing their ideology on our youth. How can the same not be true about the pop-culture world? It's far more influential on young people (and not-so-young people) than pony-tailed lecturers.

Conservatives need to find ways to embrace this area of the media, navigate it, and funnel their message down to the public through the mechanism of entertainment. No one's saying it will be easy or have an immediate impact. After all, it's a world that's been largely saturated with liberal activism for decades. But it *can* be done.

The drive should start with promoting simple awareness, and it shouldn't be overtly partisan.

A good way to get the ball rolling would be to begin treating the deep challenges our country faces as *causes* rather than as issues. Issues are boring. Causes are more intriguing, aren't as toxic, and command a greater sense of urgency – especially when you put a little *star power* behind them.

Imagine a series of television commercials, in the format of public service announcements, featuring actor Vince Vaughn. I'm using Vaughn as an example because he's one of the few, outed fiscal conservatives in Hollywood. He's also an immediately identifiable celebrity who audiences have an affection for. In his trademark comedic, dapper style, Vaughn throws out some metaphorical explanation of how screwed up our nation's spending problem is, and how that problem affects

each and every one of us. The presentation should be simple, but it should also get across a point that people can relate to – much like the *Apple vs Microsoft* commercials from a few years ago, or the “this is your brain on drugs” campaign from the 1980s. The series could expand to cover over-regulation, over-taxation, and more. They should be aired not on cable news networks, but during some of the popular, prime-time reality shows.

It sounds overly simplistic, but I would argue that something like that can do far more to attract low-information voters to a commonsense, conservative viewpoint than thirty minutes of Paul Ryan using a laser-pointer on color-coded charts. That’s no dig on Paul Ryan. I have a huge amount of admiration for him and his dedication to sparing my kids from paying the crippling price for my generation’s spending addiction. But the sad reality is that his efforts only appeal to people who already give a damn. Many people don’t – more due to being clueless than selfish.

It’s the *clueless, unprincipled* vote that conservatives can no longer afford to concede to the Democratic party when it comes to elections. These people are sway-able, and they’re prime for a wake-up call. *Dumbing down* the conservative message through the pop-culture world may just be the way of doing it. If commonsense conservatism is given a mainstream makeover, and starts shedding its curmudgeonly stigma, the tide may begin to shift when it comes to close elections.

Public awareness commercials would merely be a good starting point. The message should expand to FM radio, SmartPhone apps, movie audiences, and beyond. We’re talking about a cultural shift, and if wealthy, conservative donors truly want to make a difference in public perception and support, they might want to consider backing such a shift rather than just the politicians themselves.