Florida GOP Muzzles 'Independent' Republican Groups

OPINION

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As humorist Dave Barry used to say, "I swear I'm not making this up!"

The Republican Party of Florida is now openly claiming that it literally – and yes, I do mean literally – "owns" the word "Republican" and that it has the absolute legal right under Florida law to deny its use to any independent organization of registered Republicans unwilling to submit to its authority.

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This means that If you're a Republican who's tired of corrupt politicians, you're breaking the law if you create the "Republican Alliance to Fight Public Corruption" without the Republican Party's express permission. Want to organize the "Republican Committee for Campaign Finance Reform?" You can forget about that as well unless you're willing to submit to the GOP's oversight. Even something as innocuous as the "Riverside Republican Club" is verboten.

With all eyes on the November election and with the fate of Donald Trump and Amendment 4 hanging in the balance, the Republican Party of Florida has decided that now is the right time to begin enforcing its bizarre claim.

In doing so, the RPOF has targeted the Florida Republican Assembly and its affiliated chapters with a barrage of "cease-and-desist" letters threatening legal action unless these groups immediately stop using the word "Republican" in their respective names. As one of the founders of the Duval County Republican Assembly, I received one of these "gag orders" via certified mail about a month ago.

For the uninitiated, the Florida Republican Assembly is a grassroots organization of rankand-file Republican voters that's been operating independently of the RPOF for many years. At times it's been openly critical of the state GOP and its leaders.

The assembly itself is a chartered member of the National Federation of Republican Assemblies, a nationwide movement whose purpose is to defend conservative principles and values in the political and policy arenas free of any interference from the Republican Party. Ronald Reagan was so enamored with the organization that he began calling Republican Assemblies



"the conscience of the Republican Party."

That was then, this is now, and a new generation of politicos are running the show in the Florida GOP.

So how does the Republican Party of Florida justify making such extravagant demands?

It originates from a specious interpretation of Florida Statute 103.081, which allows a political party to register, for its exclusive use, its "name, abbreviation, [and] symbol" with the Florida Secretary of State. Note that the wording of the statute is singular, not plural, which means only one political party name per customer.

Starting in 1990 when the RPOF made its first filing it did exactly what was expected. It registered "Republican Party of Florida" as its name, "RPOF" as its abbreviation and the party's stylized elephant logo, superimposed over a map of Florida, as its symbol.

In its second filing with the Secretary of State nine years later, however, the RPOF decided to also register the word "Republican" as an additional form of the party's name. It was a legal absurdity but so long as the RPOF was only enforcing its ownership claims internally on clubs and organizations looking to officially associate with the Florida GOP, no one paid much attention.

That's all changed now that the RPOF is clamping down on Republican voters statewide.

Allow me to state the obvious. The word "Republican" is manifestly not the same as "Republican Party of Florida." To claim that the word "Republican," by itself, carries the same meaning as "Republican Party of Florida" defies all logic. A word that's been in common use for 170 years to describe a particular type of partisan voter is not and never will be the property of the Florida GOP. For it to insist otherwise is delusional.

And yet, here we are. For the leadership of the RPOF to be preaching party unity while issuing cease-and-desist "gag orders" that trample on the rights of ordinary Republicans is the ultimate hypocrisy! As a sop to the Florida Republican Assemblies, Evan Power, who replaced disgraced former party Chair Cristian Ziegler this past January in a snap election, has offered a "compromise": The FRA and its chapters could apply to the RPOF for "conditional charters" under what's known as RPOF Rule 1. The "conditional charter" would allow us to continue operating albeit under the watchful eye of party officials. Here's the rub, however, regarding Rule 1: "A conditional charter may be revoked at any time, without notice, and for any reason in the sole discretion of the Chairman of the Republican Party of Florida."

It's an offer we're inclined to refuse.

The notion that any group of Republican voters would have to obtain a "charter" from the RPOF is antithetical to what it means to operate independently of the institutional Republican Party. In my 20 years as a member of the Duval County Republican Executive Committee and as its former Chair, I've never known a chartered Republican club to openly criticize a party leader, a Republican office holder or take an official stand on an important matter of public policy. Club presidents must be constantly on their guard knowing their charters could be pulled by party officials should they ever step out of line. Not surprisingly the effect of this kind of chartering process is to enforce conformity and stifle dissent.

Republican voters, especially Trump supporters, are already suspicious of the institutional Republican Party. The RPOF is only making things worse. We've reached a point where the Republican Party's leadership won't be satisfied with anything less than total control over every aspect of Republican politics in Florida.

The RPOF needs to recognize that there is the brightline distinction between the Republican Party and its voters. As a registered Republican I should be free to use the word "Republican" in concert with other like-minded partisans without falling on my knees in supplication to the Florida GOP.

When we registered as "Republicans" we didn't agree to be ruled by party bosses nor did we sign away our rights under the First Amendment. We are not the party's chattel.