Republicans say party needs to get with the times

Contributed by KASIE HUNT and STEVE PEOPLES

WASHINGTON (AP) _ To hear some Republicans tell it, their party needs to get with the times. Some of the early prescriptions offered by officials and
operatives to rebuild after a devastating lost: retool the party message to appeal to Latinos, women and working-class people; upgrade antiquated get-out-the-vote systems with the latest technology; teach candidates how to handle the new media landscape.

From longtime Republican luminaries to the party's rising stars, almost everyone asked about the Republicans' Nov. 6 election drubbing seems to agree that a wholesale update is necessary for a party that appears to be running years behind Democrats in adapting to rapidly changing campaigns and an evolving electorate.

Interviews with more than a dozen Republicans at all levels of the party indicated that post-election soul-searching must quickly turn into a period of action.

``We've got to have a very brutally honest review from stem to stern of what we did and what we didn't do, and what worked and what failed,'' said former Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, who ran the party in the 1990s.

The party ``has to modernize in a whole wide range of ways,'' added former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who ran against White House nominee Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential primary. ``We were clearly wrong on a whole range of fronts.''

To determine what went wrong, the Republican National Committee is examining every detail of the 2012 elections, with the goal of rebuilding the party for the future _ much as the Democratic Party did in the 1980s after suffering a series of stinging losses at all levels of government.

Now, as was the case back then, the stakes are enormous for the party that failed to win the White House and has lost the popular vote for several national elections in a row. They're perhaps even higher for Republicans grappling for ways to court a rapidly changing electorate whose voting groups don't naturally gravitate toward the Republican Party. The dangers of failing to act could be severe: permanent minority status.

So it's little surprise that, after the election, some Republicans were quick to sound stark warnings.

The scale of the losses largely shocked a party whose top-shelf operatives went into Election Day believing Republicans had at least a decent chance of capturing the White House and gaining ground in Congress, where Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and had a sizable minority in the Senate.

Instead, Romney lost all but one of the nine contested battleground states, North Carolina, to President Barack Obama. Republicans also lost ground to Democrats in both houses of Congress, though Republicans retained their House majority.

How to move forward dominated the discussions at last week's Republican Governors Association meeting in Las Vegas, where some of the party's leading voices castigated Romney's assessment _ made in what was supposed to be a private telephone call to donors _ that Obama won re-election because of the ``gifts'' the president had provided to blacks, Hispanics and young voters. These governors faulted Romney.

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal attributed Romney's loss to a lack of ``a specific vision that connected with the American people.''

Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown, who describes himself as a ``pro-choice moderate Republican,'' echoed Republicans across the spectrum when he said last week: ``We need to be a larger-tent party.'' Brown lost his Senate seat to Democrat Elizabeth Warren.

Across the board, Republicans say that arguably the most urgent task facing the party is changing its attitude about immigration as it looks to woo Hispanics. This rapidly growing group voted overwhelmingly for Obama, by margins of 7-to-1 over Romney, who had shifted to the right on the issue during the Republican primary campaign.

It didn't take long after the election for even staunch conservatives to start changing their tune on immigration. Days after the election, even conservative TV and radio host Sean Hannity said he would support an immigration reform bill.

Said Barbour: ``If we would be for good economic policy in terms of immigration, that would go a long way toward solving the political problem.''

It's not just Hispanics.

Republicans said they also have work to do with single women and younger voters, many of whom tend to be more liberal on social issues than the current Republican Party. These Republicans said a change in tone is needed, though not a change in principles such as opposition to abortion.

``We need to make sure that we're not perceived as intolerant,'' said Ron Kaufman, a veteran Republican strategist who advised Romney's campaign. ``The bottom line is we were perceived to be intolerant on some issues. And tone-deaf on others.''

Republicans also said the party has to work on its relationship with working-class voters.

``Republicans have to start understanding that small business and entrepreneurs are important, but the people who work for them are also important,'' said Rep. Charles Bass of New Hampshire, who lost his seat to Democrat Ann Kuster. ``We've got to be compassionate conservatives.''

Republican leaders also said their party needs to change how it communicates its message. Obama's campaign, they said, was particularly effective at talking directly to voters, and building relationships over long periods of time, whereas the Republicans were more focused on top-down communication such as TV ads and direct mail.

``There are whole sections of the American public that we didn't even engage with,'' Gingrich said.

Others pointed to the pressing need to recruit candidates who know how to stick to a carefully honed message, especially in a Twitter-driven era. Among their case studies: Senate candidates Richard Mourdock in Indiana and Todd Akin in Missouri, who both discussed rape and pregnancy during the campaign, to the chagrin of party leaders looking to narrow the Democrats' advantage among women.

``We need candidates who are capable of articulating their policy positions without alienating massive voting blocs,'' said Kevin McLaughlin, a Republican operative who worked on several Senate races for the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

Many Republicans say the party doesn't have a choice but to change _ and quickly.

Said Kaufmann: ``In this business, either you learn and grow or you die.''