



Gross a polarizing figure for Iowa GOP

By [Jason Hancock](#) 12.21.09

He was the chief of staff to the longest serving governor in Iowa's history and the Republican Party's 2002 gubernatorial nominee. He is a major GOP donor and a respected political strategist in Iowa and around the country.

But over the last year Doug Gross has become one of the most polarizing figures in Iowa Republican politics. While still an influential figure, especially among the party's elite, Gross has become public enemy No.1 for many grassroots conservatives and evangelical Christians.

The anger Gross has drawn in some political circles, when coupled with his longtime association with former Gov. Terry Branstad, is expected to become an issue in the 2010 gubernatorial primary, with one observer saying he could amount to a poison pill for the campaign.

"I don't believe for a second he's not involved in the Branstad campaign, but I think he's keeping a low profile," said Shane Vander Hart, a conservative blogger and member of the Polk County Republican Central Committee. "That's probably a smart strategy for Terry Branstad. Doug's burnt some bridges. He decided to more or less come out against social conservatism, so he's going to be a drag on the campaign if he was publicly connected to it."

The story of how Gross became such a controversial figure in conservative politics mirrors the tale of a party's soul-searching journey towards redefining itself after years of electoral disasters.

Gross did not respond to repeated interview requests from The Iowa Independent.

'A minority group within a minority party'

After 30 years in control of Terrace Hill, Republicans lost the governor's mansion in 1998 to Democrat Tom Vilsack. By 2006, Democrats had not only held on to the executive branch, but managed to capture both legislative chambers.

In the fall of 2008, after another series of losses for Iowa Republicans, Gross embarked on a media tour, giving his prescription to fix the party. Gross called on the GOP to be more inclusive and focus less on social issues that are turning off a younger generation of voters.

During a November 2008 appearance on Iowa Public Television's "Iowa Press," Gross said the Democrat's huge voter registration edge and electoral success could be partially attributed to moderates fleeing the Republican Party of Iowa. The party will never be able to regain power, he said, if it continues to have "a litmus test associated with social issues for people in party leadership positions."

"[Social conservatives] are an important part of our base," Gross said. "We can't win without them, but we can't win only with them and we need to understand that and broaden the tent."

A few weeks later, Gross did an interview with controversial Christian radio host Steve Deace. In a debate that got heated, Gross repeated his assertion that the party needed to broaden its appeal if it ever wanted to be in power and advance its agenda again.

"Social conservatives are a minority group within a minority party," Gross told Deace. "If we aren't broad enough the interests of social conservatives will never be in governance."

The Republican Party, both nationally and in Iowa, has become perceived as the party of excessive bigotry, Gross said at the time, "whether that be bigotry associated with immigrants or gay rights. We are not that party and we should not be that party. It turns people off. We can be a party of tolerance and respect other people's views and still further our values."

Gross and his organization, the Iowa First Foundation, commissioned two polls early in 2009 that he said offers clear evidence that voters are more interested in candidates who focus on economic issues rather than social issues like same-sex marriage and abortion.

Social conservatives argue that line of thinking only alienates the party's most loyal voters.

"We all know what Mr. Gross' polls are going to say — that the Republican Party needs to free itself of Christian influence if it wants to win elections," Deace said after the polling information was made public."

Conservative backlash

In a blog post, Bryan English, spokesman for the influential social conservative group Iowa Family Policy Center, compared Gross to a “frat boy who has never been as popular or successful as his drinking buddies thought he was back in college.”

“He becomes increasingly irrelevant as time goes on, he continues to refuse to grow up, and people quit listening to how great things were ‘back in college,’” English said.

Conservative blogger Craig Robinson wrote in August that Gross represented one of the main obstacles in Branstad’s path to the 2010 GOP gubernatorial nomination.

“If Branstad does ultimately decide to run for governor, his association with Doug Gross is likely to cause a tremendous amount of grief in the early portion of the campaign,” he said.

Vander Hart told The Iowa Independent about a meeting he attended where Gross’s comments seemed out of line.

“I was at a conservative breakfast club meeting where he said we need to stop picking candidates that are pastors of fringe churches who home educate their children,” he said. “Here you have a huge base within the party that home educate, and then you have evangelicals who wonder what’s wrong with pastors running for office. It was a comment that was completely unnecessary.”

Afterwards, Vander Hart said he was tempted to introduce himself to Gross by saying, “Hi, I’m Shane and I’m a former pastor who home schools his kids.”

2010 on the horizon

One person who has known Gross for many years is Steve Grubbs.

Grubbs, a veteran Republican strategist and founder of the political consulting firm Victory Enterprises Inc., said it is strange for social conservatives to question Gross’ loyalty, since he has always been strong on social issues.

“Doug is a conservative,” Grubbs said. “He was a conservative in 2002 when he ran in the Republican gubernatorial primary against my candidate, Steve Sukup, and he is still a conservative today.”

Because he is arguing for what he believes is the best interest of the party, it’s understandable that he would rub some the wrong way.

“It’s not a surprise, because Doug is challenging a deeply held belief,” Grubbs said. “When you do that there is going to be a strong reaction.”

The problem, according to Vander Hart, isn’t so much what Gross has been saying but how he’s been saying it.

"I understand he's concerned about running Republicans who are electable, and that the economy needs to be front and center in the campaign," he said. "I don't think most people disagree with that. But there are ways to go about saying those things without alienating people, and unfortunately I don't think he struck that balance."

Ultimately, how much impact Gross has on the 2010 campaign is still up in the air. Branstad is facing a similar brand of criticism regarding his own social conservative credentials, ranging from his choice of a lieutenant governor that supports abortion rights to his appointment of the Iowa Supreme Court Justice who penned the decision earlier this year legalizing same-sex marriage.

But some are pointing to the 2010 gubernatorial primary as an election just as important to Gross as it is to any of the candidates. Civic Skinny, the anonymous gossip columnist for Des Moines alt-weekly Cityview, said 2010 represents a chance for Gross to "settle the score" with Bob Vander Plaats, the gubernatorial candidate of choice for Iowa's social conservative community.

Gross and Vander Plaats first faced off in 2002, when both sought the GOP nomination for governor.

A tough and at times ugly primary fight ended when Gross barely avoided the nomination being decided at convention, winning only 35.6 percent of the vote in a three-way race. The nearly two-thirds of Republican voters who didn't support him never truly came home, and incumbent Vilsack easily won a second term that fall.

"There was bad blood between Doug Gross and Bob Vander Plaats during the '02 GOP gubernatorial race, especially at the end," Skinny wrote. "The two ripped one another, nearly allowing Rep. Steve Sukup, as the good guy, to win a razor-thin, three-way primary race."

Then Gross and Vander Plaats lined up on different sides of the 2008 Iowa Caucuses, with Gross working for Mitt Romney and Vander Plaats working for Mike Huckabee.

Huckabee emerged victorious in a race that turned ugly in public, and even uglier behind the scenes.

"In other words, Gross is still pissed, and one reasons he's backing Branstad is so he can settle a few scores," Skinny wrote.