

Why Huntsman and Perry Aren't the Answer Either

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The two latest Republican candidates, or non-candidates, for their party's presidential nomination, Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas, and Jon Huntsman, the former Utah Governor and former US Ambassador to China under President Obama, demonstrate that 2012 is shaping up to be a very unusual year for the GOP. The fundamental problem facing the Republicans is that at a time when a [generic candidate from their party is out-polling the incumbent Democratic president](#), the party cannot find any generic feeling candidates. In a primary race which should be about electability more than anything else, no candidate appears very electable. Thus, some Republicans keep looking around for a Mitch Daniels, Chris Christie or other right wing deus ex machina to save them.

That some politicians are still considering getting into the race with the first voting only seven months away is evidence of the weakness of the field and of dissatisfaction among Republican decision leaders with the existing field of candidates. It also reflects a specific failure by Tim Pawlenty and Mitt Romney, both of whom, since the 2008 election, have been well-positioned to emerge from the field as the strongest and most electable candidate. The emergence of Huntsman, a former governor with strong roots in Utah, as the great hope for many within the Party's leadership is a particular blow to Romney who, of course, has a similar profile. However, despite this dissatisfaction and the continued search for the ideal candidate, Romney remains the front-runner for his party's nomination.

Huntsman's emergence as an appealing candidate is explainable due to the lack of any Republican, including Romney, to clearly demonstrate electability. Rick Perry's potential candidacy is more baffling. On the surface, it would seem that the phrase "Governor of Texas" would be enough to dissuade most voters given the country's experience with the last president who had that line next to his name. Perry is also, like most of the candidates in the race, another far right politician who will make small government, low taxes for the wealthy and social conservatism the center of his campaign. It is difficult to imagine what group of voters will feel represented by Perry who do not already have a voice in Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Rick Santorum or Herman Cain. It would seem that the far right voters can only be divided a few times, but Perry's potential candidacy suggests otherwise. Like these other candidates, Perry's extremism makes him all but unelectable in a general election, so electability cannot be the base of his candidacy either.

Perry's possible candidacy seems to be born largely of opportunism, but the same logic that makes his candidacy possible, essentially that none of the right-wingers currently in the race have a broad enough appeal to get elected, also makes Perry's success at the very

least highly unlikely. Like Palin, Cain and the others, Perry is also too right wing to get elected. The glimmer of hope for Perry is that he can emerge from the crowd of extremist candidates by being the mature one capable of organizing and raising money as well as conducting himself in a way that is at least vaguely presidential, making his candidacy more plausible.

If Perry or Huntsman are serious about running for president, they will have to prove it right away, not by appeasing their party's right wing base or by yelling the loudest about the need to cut taxes to the wealthy, although both those things will help, but by demonstrating an ability to raise money and build an organization. Perry's candidacy is still being discussed only because Bachmann, Palin, Santorum and the other far right candidates in the race have failed to do this. Huntsman will have to catch up with Romney in money and organization or quickly become another candidate who might have been a good candidate if only things had been different. Huntsman's appeal is based on the failure of Romney to excite much of anybody, but the former ambassador lags behind Romney in organization and money and would likely lose badly to the current front-runner if voting began next week.

The problem the Republicans have created for themselves is that by empowering the far right of their party to lead the battle against Obama in 2009 and 2010, they have unleashed a flood of candidates who enjoy high name recognition and pockets of intense support on the far right, but no broad support from the electorate more generally. More damagingly, for the Republican Party, the far right may be sufficiently powerful to stop the nomination of any candidate who deviates from their extremist views. This is the test which Romney and the party face; and it cannot be avoided by Jon Huntsman or Rick Perry, jumping into the race fresh from Texas, Beijing, or anyplace else.