

Romney Still the Front-Runner

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In the last week, three things have happened in the race for the Republican nomination for president: Texas governor Rick Perry officially became a candidate, Tim Pawlenty's candidacy officially came to an end, and Michele Bachmann won the Iowa Straw Poll. While none of these developments involved him directly, all three of these developments collectively were a victory for Mitt Romney, moving him slightly closer to his party's nomination.

Romney's seventh place finish in the Iowa Straw Poll was a resounding defeat, but one which occurred in a contest he had little chance of winning and is of no clear bearing on the nominating process. In the eyes of many Republican donors and strategists Bachmann's victory in the polls, as well as the strong finishes by Ron Paul, Herman Cain and Rick Santorum, all of whom drew more support than Romney, underscore both the dubious relevance of the poll as well as the growing need for the party to rally around a more moderate and rational candidate. The natural person to play that role is, of course, Romney.

The field of candidates also changed last week as Perry more or less replaced Pawlenty. Pawlenty's candidacy always had the feel of something that was cooked up by a group of Republican consultants seeking the ideal demographic candidate, but never grew beyond that. As a former governor of a Midwestern swing state, with a reputation for being a moderate, and coming from a humble background, Pawlenty seemed like the perfect candidate. He had been on Senator John McCain's vice-presidential shortlist in 2008 for these reasons. However, Pawlenty's failure to communicate a compelling rationale for his candidacy or to connect with voters doomed his candidacy before it started.

Pawlenty was also one of the few Republican candidates who could have competed with Romney for centrist and moderate Republicans and who could make a case for his electability that was at least as strong as Romney's. With Pawlenty out of the race, the moderate, electable space in the Republican field just got a lot less crowded for Romney. Jon Huntsman is the only candidate who could compete with Romney for this type of support, but his candidacy has not yet gotten off of the ground; and it is not clear that it will.

Perry getting in just as Pawlenty is getting out means that a northern candidate, who could plausibly present himself as a moderate, has been replaced by a Texan candidate who if elected president would make us remember George W. Bush as the liberal former governor of Texas who became president. This means that Bachmann, for example, fresh off of her victory in the Iowa Straw Poll, has to contend with another far-right candidate vying for support from the Tea Party faction of the party. Additionally, Perry still has to

make the transition from Republican flavor of the month and strong paper candidate to legitimate candidate with resources and support. Notably, Pawlenty and Huntsman have already failed to make this transition.

Should Perry emerge, later in the nominating process, as the last right wing extremist standing, he would be a more serious threat to Romney than Bachmann would in a similar situation, but for now Perry is another far right candidate who presents a threat to Bachmann, Cain and others while Romney can solidify his support in the center of the party. The longer these candidates remain in the race, fighting each other, the more Romney will be able to solidify the financial and organizational foundations of his front-runner status. Of course, a lot can still go wrong for the front-runner who still has a difficult time communicating with voters and will run into strong resistance from many in his party's activist wing. Campaigns at this stage are nonetheless about positioning and building organizations. Romney has thus far done these things relatively well, presenting himself as the front-runner who is slightly above the fray and focusing on President Obama while the others seek ways to stand out from the crowded field.

Unfortunately, Romney is only a moderate in the context of a Republican field of candidates that is probably more right wing than any in history. Romney's credentials as a moderate stem from his actions as governor of Massachusetts, a position which he has not held for almost four years, his more tempered style and his failure to sign on to the most outrageous assertions of the far right.

Romney may, in fact, be more liberal on some issues than most of his opponents, and have a slightly more sophisticated understanding of foreign policy than Perry or Bachmann, but on economic issues, his views are just as wrongheaded as the rest of the field. Like his entire party, Romney is captive of a radical anti-tax and anti-spending ideology that would drive the U.S. further into recession. In this regard, he is just as dangerous as his less polished and more extreme competitors.