

# Romney's Weakness as a Candidate

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Posted: 05/09/2012 11:09 am

When Mitt Romney emerged from the Republican defeat in 2008 as the early frontrunner for his party's 2012 nomination for president, he was viewed as a weak candidate for two main reasons. First, it was thought by many that Romney's history in Massachusetts as a liberal Republican would create problems for Romney as he sought to win votes from a very conservative primary electorate. Second, some viewed Romney's religious faith as a potential concern because they believed that people would hesitate to vote for a Mormon.

As Romney easily won the Republican nomination it became clear that these concerns, which were always more relevant to the primary than the general election, were not major problems. Romney's history as a liberal or moderate Republican did not hurt him because he was able to dominate the opposition with organization and money. Moreover, this background may end up helping him in the general election because it could make Romney more appealing to centrist swing voters. Similarly, Romney's religion, while a source of *sotto voce* discussion throughout the primary, turned out to have little bearing on the outcome of the primary season.

Over the course of the primary, another more significant problem regarding Mitt Romney, one which is potentially much more serious, emerged. As Romney has campaigned for president, it has become increasingly clear that while he is smart, well-spoken, looks presidential and has an attractive family, he is also not a strong campaigner with little ability to build connections with people or inspire excitement from supporters.

Romney's penchant for awkward-sounding gaffes that confirm what many voters fear about him is only part of this. Nonetheless, saying that he is ["not concerned about the very poor,"](#) that ["yes, corporations are people,"](#) or that ["Ann \[Romney\] drives a couple of Cadillacs,"](#) has not helped Romney remake his image as somebody who is not simply a rich businessman who only cares about other rich people.

Romney's weakness as a candidate, however, goes beyond this. The absence of any compelling personal story and a professional background that is uniquely unfitted for 2012 is also a major problem for Romney. Unlike President Obama or previous successful and unsuccessful nominees from both parties like John McCain, John Kerry, Bill Clinton or even George W. Bush, there is nothing in Romney's past to suggest triumph over hardship or personal crisis. Instead, he is simply a successful businessman who was born into privilege and then made even more money. There is nothing inherently wrong with not having an interesting or inspiring personal story, but it makes Romney a less appealing or memorable candidate.

Unlike the president, Romney has difficulty relating to ordinary Americans and their struggles. While some may not warm to Barack Obama's personal style, at least the president can discuss

things like struggling to repay student loans, worrying about securing proper health care for sick and elderly family members or growing up in a complex and difficult family and economic setting, which are part of the lives of many Americans, but with which Romney has absolutely no experience.

Romney's penchant for, to be charitable, phrasing things badly, prickliness while campaigning, and difficulty communicating compassion or concern could end up being very damaging to Romney in what is shaping up to be a close election. Swing voters in particular will be more likely to support a candidate, and warm to that candidate's policy positions, if they identify with him, care about him or are inspired by him. Romney, for all his obvious intelligence, capacity for hard work and earnestness has proven unable to elicit this type of response even from most of his strong supporters. He has also yet to make a great speech and still seems stilted during even the most basic kinds of campaign communications.

Romney's weakness as a candidate was not entirely unforeseeable. He has only won an election once; and that was a decade ago. He has also lost two major elections, a U.S. Senate race in 1994 and the presidential primary in 2008 when he could not exploit early frontrunner John McCain's early campaign mishaps. Romney's mixed electoral record did not receive much attention during the primaries because it was overshadowed by his strong campaign operation, but this campaign operation is due to Romney's discipline and business skills more than any particular gift for communicating with or persuading voters.

Other Republican candidates, for example Rick Santorum, or even Rick Perry, had better personal stories, were more genuine and seemed able to relate better to ordinary people, but they never had a chance at the nomination due to their poor organization and radical views. It is a reflection on the state of the Republican Party that in 2012 the party was able to find some good candidates and some plausible candidates, but nobody who qualified as both.