

Running Against Romney

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Herman Cain's turn as the front-runner for the non-Romney division of the Republican Party's presidential primary seems to be winding down. The candidate most likely to take Cain's place, at least for the next few weeks, is Newt Gingrich. Gingrich will continue the back to the 1990s feel of the Republican primary, but like Cain, and Donald Trump, Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry before Cain, Gingrich has no real chance at being his party's nominee in the general election. Romney remains the overwhelming favorite to win the nomination, regardless of the relative positions of candidates like Gingrich or Cain.

Romney is, by the standards of most of the post-war period, a very ordinary candidate for his party's nomination. His relative lack of experience on foreign policy and singularly uninspiring style are clear weaknesses. However, he looks presidential, can speak fluently on most major issues, works hard and presents himself as bright and mature. He will be a strong opponent for President Obama, but his path to the nomination has been a strange one revealing the hollowness of today's Republican Party.

Romney is also proof that the sports adage that it is better to be lucky than to be good applies to politics as well. It is unusual for a candidate to face such minimal obstruction in his path to winning a nomination when there is no incumbent. Both President Obama and John McCain faced stiffer competition in 2008. Previous Republican nominees such as George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush had plausible opponents a few months before the first caucus, but Romney does not.

As a liberal Republican likely to encounter some prejudice due to his faith, Romney should have encountered more serious opposition in his quest for the nomination. However, the field of candidates arrayed against him are a colorful, if somewhat strange, group of politicians who share little more than an allegiance to far right ideology and the inability to win a general election against Barack Obama.

The other side of Romney's good fortune in avoiding a primary against a more conservative candidate able to mount a serious campaign, is Obama's bad luck in drawing Romney as an opponent. The president's campaign team would have loved to run against the likes of Michele Bachmann or Herman Cain, but instead will face a relatively strong opponent who unlike the rest of the field passes the initial laugh test of plausibility.

Romney, however, is not invulnerable, but his weaknesses are different than those of his opponents. Obama will have a hard time running against Romney simply by portraying him as a far right extremist, as the president would have done against Perry or Cain. Romney's particular weakness is that his message rests on his record in the private sector.

Many Republicans have hoped for a presidential candidate with strong business credentials for years. This is not surprising from the party of business, but having a candidate with roots in the financial services sector in the midst of an enduring recession for which the finance sector is increasingly being blamed is probably not what the Republicans have had in mind for all those years.

Romney has, and will continue to claim that, as an experienced businessman he understands the economy and how jobs are created. He will repeat this like a mantra despite the reality that there is [little evidence that during his quarter century in the private sector Romney created many jobs](#). More significantly, Romney will have to persuade the American people that expertise in the financial sector is what is needed in Washington to solve the problems facing the country now.

Campaigning against this should be relatively easy for Obama or any Democrat, particularly given the current economic environment, but Obama's presidency makes this tougher. A hard-hitting campaign attacking Romney's credentials and perspective on economic questions would seem a little strange from a president who himself has been so timid in confronting Wall Street and who has deferred to advice from financial insiders throughout most of his presidency.

Obama's recent efforts to sharpen his rhetoric and position himself more aggressively relative to the Republicans, particularly with regards to economic questions, have been a sign that the president is open to embracing the type of approach which will be needed to defeat Romney. However, largely due to the first few years of his presidency, this new style has not seemed convincing for many voters who have grown to see Obama as unwilling to challenge powerful financial interests.

If Romney is able to get away with his assertions that he has relevant job creating experience and economic expertise based on his work in the private sector, his path to the White House will be considerably easier. Obama can stop this from happening, but to do so he will need to redouble his efforts, in words and actions, to demonstrate that there is some space between his own presidency and Romney's background.