

Mitt Romney's Very Bad Week

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 01/24/2012 2:59 pm

Mitt Romney has been the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for so long that it is easy to forget what an unlikely frontrunner he is, and not just because of his moderate, for a Republican, views on social issues. Romney is also a one-term Governor of a state that will almost certainly go for Obama in November, and which has not supported a Republican for president since 1984. Additionally, although he has ample experience working in finance, Romney's only government experience is his time as governor of Massachusetts. His complete lack of foreign policy or military experience has, surprisingly, not been an issue at all in this primary, but it is the kind of thing that usually comes up in presidential campaigns. Romney, while a hard worker, is also not a natural politician. He does not connect well with voters or have a compelling personal story.

Romney's status as frontrunner originated with his second place finish to John McCain in the 2008 Republican primary campaign. While it is common for the Republicans to nominate the person who came in second the previous time, that person usually has some additional credentials. Ronald Reagan, for example, came in second in 1976 and got the nomination in 1980, but he had been a national figure and conservative leader for years by 1980. Similarly, John McCain came in second in 2000 and won the nomination eight years later, there was no Republican primary in 2004, but McCain was a long-serving and, at the time, well-respected U.S. Senator. Romney, by contrast, has almost no other credential than coming in second in 2008.

As an inexperienced first-time candidate who had served only four years in elected office, Romney managed to barely beat out Mike Huckabee to secure a number two finish in the 2008 primaries, and was able to leverage that into frontrunner status in 2012. Last week, however, this all changed; at least it appeared to have changed. Romney lost two primaries last week, which is particularly noteworthy given that voters only voted in one state last week. However, in addition to finishing second to Gingrich in South Carolina, Romney also was stripped of his Iowa caucus victory as final vote tallies showed the winner in Iowa to be Rick Santorum.

Fortunately for Romney, he is running against two candidates, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, who do not have the discipline or ability to capitalize on Romney's ill fortune, and a third, Ron Paul, who has a reliable vote, but little room to grow. Both Santorum and Gingrich spent most of the last two years talking instead of working. For this Romney can be grateful. Imagine how much worse off Romney would be if Gingrich could match him dollar for dollar in Florida now, or if Santorum, following even a surprise second place finish in Iowa, could have continued to wage a serious campaign.

Gingrich may have some lasting power, but his success depends on his ability to work and raise money outlasting his penchant for bizarre statements, scandals and more revelations about his

personal life. Gingrich's personal life is unbecoming of a social conservative who would like to tell the rest of America what we can or cannot do; and as the campaign progresses this will become a problem. Right-wing ideologues won't trust him and the rest of America will fear him.

Romney's status as frontrunner was nonetheless damaged by his bad week, but he still remains by far the most likely Republican to get the nomination. The media spend a lot of time telling us how frontrunners often stumble, but they rarely follow-up with the equally relevant point that they also often recover. George W. Bush in 2000, Walter Mondale in 1984, John McCain in 2008 and George H.W. Bush in 1988 are among the clear frontrunners who stumbled at some point during the long primary season before recovering in time to win the nomination. Romney's deep pockets, strong organization and good fortune to have Newt Gingrich as his strongest opponent, all suggest that Romney too will recover and be his party's nominee for president.

While the revival of Newt Gingrich's candidacy is welcome, or at least entertaining news for most supporters of President Obama, it remains unlikely that the president will have the good fortune to run against Gingrich in November. The best news for Obama supporters was not Gingrich's return, but the success of the attacks against likely nominee Romney. It is likely that the Obama campaign had long been preparing to attack Romney as an out-of-touch, super wealthy practitioner of "vulture capitalism," but they could not have been certain of the potency of those attacks. Last week demonstrated just how powerful those attacks can be; and that was probably the worst thing about Romney's very bad week.