Closing the Deal for Romney and Obama

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The view that Mitt Romney cannot close the deal with Republican voters has become broadly accepted by most people observing and commenting on this year's Republican presidential primary. There is some truth to this view, as suggested by Romney's inability to finish off a weak field of competitors despite an enormous edge in money, organization, stature and endorsements, or to get more than 50 percent of the vote in most states. Nonetheless, Romney is still very likely to be his party's nominee in the general election, notwithstanding occasionally-discussed scenarios about brokered conventions.

This narrative about Romney also obscures the similar inability of another presidential candidate to solidify his support despite a series of political developments breaking his way. Supporters of President Obama should be delighted that the field of potential Republican opponents for the general election is so weak, and that the Republicans have shown themselves to be more narrow minded, hateful and stuck in some strange dystopian fantasy of the past than any Democrat could have hoped. However, given all this, supporters of the President should be equally concerned by the difficulty Obama has encountered in leveraging these circumstances into consistently stronger poll numbers.

The latest Gallup poll data from March 19-21 shows Obama with a 46 percent approval rating, while 47 percent of voters disapprove of the President. The Gallup general election poll data from March 17-21 shows Romney beating Obama by four points. While the election is still more than seven months away, these numbers are not encouraging for Obama and suggest that, despite his apparent weakness as a candidate, Romney still has a good chance in the general election.

These poll numbers are partially explainable by the economic climate which, while showing signs of improvement, is still not strong, the virulent anti-Obama rhetoric which has been ubiquitous on the right since he took office, as well as by the ongoing war in Afghanistan and rising gas prices. All of these factors, regardless of whether they are good or bad reasons to dislike the President, weaken Obama's electoral appeal, and are unlikely to change before the election. More troublingly for Obama and his supporters is that, while these things are likely to persist throughout the campaign, it is possible, perhaps even probable, that over the next weeks and months as Romney's nomination becomes more certain, Romney will turn back to being a centrist and become a more competitive general election candidate.

This does not put the President in a great position. At a time like this, when the Republican candidates are sputtering and their party is positioning itself as anti-women to a significantly greater degree than any time in recent memory, Obama should be pulling away, but he is not. This again demonstrates how fortunate Obama is to have such a strangely weak field of Republican opponents for 2012, but it also suggests that for Obama to win in November he will either have to rely upon Romney not evolving into a candidate who can better appeal to the center, or Obama will have to find a way to mobilize more support for himself and his policies.
The former certainly is possible, but hoping to simply continue to get lucky is not the kind of thing on which to hang your reelection campaign. It is also possible that the economy could pick up substantially between now and November, but that too is largely out of Obama's control. This means that Obama is the one who needs to close the deal and give swing voters a compelling reason to vote for him. If the way to do this were clear Obama would be doing it already, but this kind of persuasion in a highly polarized political context, with relatively few undecided voters, is often quite difficult. Most voters know a lot about Obama and have made up their minds about him. Accordingly, the ability of Obama to introduce new information which could change people's minds is limited.

The challenge for the Democrats is to find a way to keep Romney hostage to the far right of his party even after he has sewn up the nomination. As long as Romney is worried about his right flank, he will continue to participate in the extremist discourse of the Tea Party and others on the far right, making it easier for Obama to carry the center and the election. The White House, either deliberately or not, drew the Republicans into the destructive contraception discussion. If the Democrats are able to do a few more things like that, Obama probably will be able to close the deal.