

Romney's Tax Returns Are Only the Beginning

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Mitt Romney's ongoing unwillingness to release his tax returns has dominated the coverage of the presidential campaign for a week or more now, as numerous Republicans have joined the Democratic campaign in calling for Romney to release his tax returns from the last several years. These Republicans are probably doing this because they simply want the story to go away, while the Democrats are hoping that there will be something in those returns that will damage Romney.

Until Romney releases these tax returns, it is not possible to know what the most damaging thing in them will be; and to some extent it doesn't matter if there is any one specific thing that is very damaging. It is, however, a certainty that Romney's tax returns will continue to tell the story of Romney as an extraordinarily wealthy man whose financial life is very different from those of ordinary Americans, and who has engaged in the kinds of wealthy-person financial shenanigans which, while not illegal, will raise more questions about Romney and his wealth.

Romney is not the first extremely wealthy man to run for president, although he may, in fact, be the wealthiest ever, but he is the first super-rich man to run in the post-2008 financial crisis and post-Occupy movement America. In today's America, more than any time in the recent and not so recent past, wide discrepancies in wealth are something people are aware of. Extreme wealth, more than ever, cuts two ways for a candidate. It signifies success and accomplishment, but it also suggests to many that the candidate did something wrong to accumulate or protect that wealth. In [Romney's case](#) that something is laying off hard-working Americans, or helping move jobs overseas.

It is likely that at some point Romney will realize that he needs to release his tax returns, face a few days of bad stories and then move on, but he will not be the last candidate to face this issue. Tax returns demonstrating a lifestyle that is radically different from most citizens, in a country increasingly aware of these difference, will be an issue for many candidates in the future. There are many politicians who, although less wealthy than Romney are still very rich, with the kinds of legal tax dodges, offshore accounts and low tax rates that are among the things Romney is currently trying to continue hiding.

For much of the 1980s and 1990s the question of how candidates served, or avoided serving, in the military during the Vietnam War was an issue that defined some candidates, for example John McCain, damaged others, like Dan Quayle or Bill Clinton, or was concealed from the voters for as long as possible, as was the case with Rudy Giuliani and Dick Cheney. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate in a long time for whom the question of what he did during the Vietnam War was not an issue. The war obviously was very divisive and forced many Americans to make difficult decisions or do things that would be hard to defend in a political campaign.

For today's generation of politicians, tax returns will play a similar role, but just as the Vietnam issue hit older baby-boomer-age men more than, for example, women or younger candidates, the tax issue will be more of a concern for wealthier politicians. In 2008, Barack Obama's tax returns showed a family which had made a lot of money recently although, compared to the Romney family, were relative paupers. These returns also showed that the Obamas had not always been wealthy and were only a few years away from financial concerns of the type faced by most Americans.

In the bigger picture, the troubles Romney is encountering in his presidential campaign this week around both his unwillingness to release his tax returns and his record at Bain indicate that the businessman turned politician model is not going to be as successful as many in the Republican Party hoped. For years, the Republican Party searched for the non-politician businessman who could deliver his pro-business message without being viewed as simply another politician. Romney, despite his one term in elected office, fits this description well.

The problem for the Republicans is that the American people, particularly after 2008, are less enthralled by the magical powers, and more suspicious of the true methods, of business success than they have been in decades. Romney would have made a good candidate in 1980, 1988 or even 2000, but today his wealth and strong ties to the finance world, are on balance, negatives. The concern around tax returns may only be the tip of the iceberg of how Americans are beginning to view their politicians differently, and Romney is the first victim of this.