

Republican Positioning for 2012

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The race for the Republican nomination for a candidate to challenge President Barack Obama in 2012 will probably be over within fourteen months at the most. Accordingly the race is beginning to take shape. At this time there are probably significantly more candidates exploring the possibility of a campaign, considering the race or trying to figure out whether or not they can win the nomination and the election, so the field of candidates will probably get smaller over the next six months.

The Republican race for the nomination has the potential to be extremely entertaining and much more open with a far greater degree of uncertainty than any recent Republican nomination battle. It also has the potential to have an impact on the Republican Party for the next decade or so. The race is unusual, for a Republican primary, because there is no clear front runner who would otherwise be the favorite for the nomination.

By this time in the 2008, 2000, 1996 election cycles and most other years when there was no incumbent seeking the Republican nomination, there was already a clear front runner who went on to win the party's nomination. In 2007, John McCain faltered a little bit, lending some drama to the race, but he nonetheless secured the nomination without much trouble. The closest thing to a front runner this year is Mitt Romney, but despite coming in second in the race for the nomination in 2008, Romney lacks the insider status or big advantage in name recognition that would make him a true front runner.

The absence of a clear front runner has encouraged numerous politicians, and at least one non-politician, to begin to explore a bid for the nomination. The breadth, and in some respects absurdity of this field, is striking. It includes Mitt Romney, a businessman turned liberal governor turned right wing ideologue, Newt Gingrich, a scandal plagued 1980s-1990s futurist, Haley Barbour, a former governor of Mississippi and chair of the RNC who would not have looked out of place railing against desegregation half a century ago, Mike Huckabee, a friendly sounding but often frightening preacher turned politician, Sarah Palin whose media savvy should not be underestimated, Michele Bachman who seems to take a sophomoric joy in saying every provocative and radical thought that pops into her head, Donald Trump a real estate developer, television personality and blowhard all rolled into one and many more and Tim Pawlenty who looks like the normal viable candidate on paper, but has failed to break through more broadly.

The individual candidates in the field obscure the probably more significant issue that the Republican Party is increasingly difficult to unify behind a single candidate or single guiding vision. For decades the Republican Party has struggled to unify their three major ideological bases, social conservatives, wealthy and corporate interests and foreign policy

hawks, particularly at the elite level, behind one candidate. Only President Ronald Reagan, and to a lesser degree, President George W. Bush were genuinely successful at doing this. Today, however, that task is considerably more difficult.

There are now significant fissures within each of these group. The libertarian and social conservative wing of the party are beginning to clash not just over domestic issues, but over foreign policy issues as well. Libertarians are calling for a more isolationist foreign policy, while social conservatives still want an active interventionist policy with a large global US presence. In other policy areas, growing concern about the deficit among some voters is not compatible with the long held Republican Party goal of making rich people richer through tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans.

These policy differences are reinforced by cultural differences within the party. The celebration of ignorance and rumor, and corresponding contempt for real knowledge and education which has come to characterize the Tea Party movement is very off-putting for more moderate Republicans whose voters are still needed in general elections. The strong Christian character of the party similarly does not sit well among non-Christians, secular conservatives and others who remain important to the party.

A strong and charismatic candidate could still unify this increasingly disparate party, but there is nobody in the current field who comes close to fitting this description. Instead, the campaign could be a long one with three or four candidates managing to hold on to one segment of the electorate long enough to keep their candidacies alive as no front runner or unifying force emerges. While this may result in a long drawn out campaign as the more colorful, but less viable candidates drop to the sidelines, it also opens up the possibility for a smart candidate to position him or herself differently and win the nomination by opening up new political space. A candidate who could draw on different parts of the fracturing Republican coalition, perhaps by running as the anti-war, deficit hawk social conservative, or the anti-Wall Street fundamentalist interventionist would be able to succeed in this way given the size and breadth of the field and pose a more serious threat to President Obama in 2012. Accordingly, this nomination may, in fact, still be won by the candidate who is willing to take a few risks and reinvent the Republican coalition.