

Romney Wraps It Up

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The Republican nominating season was good entertainment, but much less competitive than many had hoped. By the end of the first week of April, Mitt Romney had wrapped up his party's nomination to such a degree that only a major unforeseen circumstance, which is extremely unlikely, can derail him. Romney's success occurred despite his history of being a moderate Republican, the difficulty he continues to have connecting with voters, his extraordinary personal wealth and his penchant for gaffes and verbal missteps.

Romney's victory, in addition to being an important win for the candidate himself, is also a triumph of the older, more traditional Republican Party. Romney, like other Republican nominees including John McCain in 2008, Bob Dole in 1996, George H.W. Bush in 1988 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 is a figure from the Republican establishment who finished second in the last open Republican primary, making him next in line for the nomination. This pattern of orderly succession with regards to nominees had existed for decades before 2012, but this year was supposed to be different. This was the year that the Tea Party and other radical Republicans were going to change the Republican Party. The faces of the Republican Party in the age of Obama were supposed to be radicals given to extremist rhetoric, a populist contempt for big government and a distrust of political and financial insiders.

Despite this political climate, the Party is about to nominate the candidate who after finishing second in the 2008 nominating process, quietly did his work, raised his money, and of course, had a tremendous reservoir of personal wealth on which to draw, and built an organization. As a result the Republican candidate will be somebody who is anything but a fire breathing extremist or outsider seeking to take back America for the fundamentalist Christians. Instead, they are nominating a one time social moderate who, as a consultant turned professional politician and candidate, is about as deeply entrenched in the finance sector-government complex as possible.

The relative ease and speed with which Romney has appeared to wrap up the Republican nomination suggests that the most interesting thing about the race was not the role of the Tea Party, the flare up of debates around long settled issues such as contraception or the brief leads held by implausible and unqualified candidates like Michele Bachmann or Herman Cain. Instead, Romney's victory is evidence that the most significant thing about this nominating season was how conventional it turned out to be. Like most Republican primaries in recent memory, the early front-runner who had raised the most money and built the best organization stumbled a bit but by early spring had emerged as the inevitable nominee. Moreover that nominee was a former big state governor, like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and came from a political family, like both Bushes and John McCain.

The talk of a brokered convention, or of meaningful primaries being held in late May and even June, which could still be heard as recently as a few weeks ago was also not out of the ordinary. During almost every primary season, for both parties, there is speculation about these types of scenarios, but in most cases, in 2012 early front-runners wind up with the nomination. Upsets that occur, tend to be of the kind we saw on the Democratic side in 2008 where one candidate with a strong organization and a lot of money lost to another candidate with a similar organization and resources.

The question of why this happened is an intriguing one. One possibility is that the Republican establishment, while not as loud or visible as the Tea Party and others on the far right is still powerful within the party and is able to steer the nominating process towards the most mainstream, moderate and thus electable candidate. Given the events of recent years, and the extent to which the moderate wing of the Republican Party has become weaker, this notion is not very plausible, but still must be considered. Another explanation is that the candidates who were more radical in their outlook simply did not work to build a viable campaign organization. This explanation boils down to Romney getting lucky and avoiding a candidate with, for example, Michele Bachmann's political views, but enough experience and diligence to do the hard work necessary to run for president.

The second explanation is the more likely one, but it also raises the question if anybody with the politics of Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, Bachmann or any of the other also-rans in this primary would have the relationships, temperament and approach necessary to build a serious presidential campaign. The evidence from 2012 suggests that the answer to that question is no. For some reason, this broad range of far right candidates representing a reasonable degree of ethnic, gender, geographical and professional diversity did not include one candidate with the skills and attitude necessary to run a real presidential campaign. This obviously does not bode well for the future of the right wing of the Republican Party.