

Let the 2008 Games Begin

The outlook for the major parties' 2008 presidential nomination fights remains a mixture of the simple and the highly problematic. Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) and Barack Obama (Ill.) along with former senator and 2004 vice presidential running mate John Edwards (N.C.) are clearly the frontrunners for the Democratic nomination, with Senators Joe Biden (Del.) and Chris Dodd (Conn.), Governor Bill Richardson (N.M.), and former governor Tom Vilsak (Iowa) as the underdogs.

It is unclear whether Clinton will be able to redraw the unflattering caricature that has been created in the minds of many Republicans, independents, and even a few Democrats; whether Obama's inexperience in national and foreign policy matters and lack of seasoning in difficult campaigns will handicap him; and whether Edwards's relative inexperience, which hurt him in 2004, will plague him again. Some mention former vice president Al Gore as a potential candidate, many believing that he would love to have another shot at winning the presidency. Few, however, believe that he is willing to fight it out for the nomination, and the party will clearly not be handing their nomination on a silver platter to Gore or anyone else.

The four Republicans given frontrunner status are former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Senator John McCain (Ariz.), former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. The underdogs already running or seriously contemplating bids are Senator Sam Brownback (Kan.); Representatives Duncan Hunter (Calif.) and Tom Tancredo (Colo.); former governors Jim Gilmore (Va.), Mike Huckabee (Ark.),

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and George Pataki (N.Y.); and former secretary of health and human services and former governor Tommy Thompson (Wisc.).

Some factors remain unclear on the Republican side. Will the war in Iraq or his age become a problem for McCain? Will Romney's apparent metamorphosis from liberal to conservative Republican over the last dozen years cause difficulties for his candidacy? Will Giuliani's liberal positions on certain social and cultural issues that are anathema to the party's conservative base stand in the way of his success?

A strong case can be made for the nomination of any of the leading candidates in each party, but equally compelling cases can be made against each one as well. Certain circumstances might even make the nomination of a few of the underdogs plausible. Voters' evaluations of each candidate's potential strengths and weaknesses, which they will emphasize and which they will ignore, are the unknown factor that will clarify the picture as 2008 approaches.

The Democratic Nomination Contest

Unquestionably, Clinton is the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, running anywhere from 14 to 22 points ahead of anyone else and sporting favorable ratings among Democrats between 66 and 80 percent. Depending on the poll and which potential candidates are included, sometimes Obama, Edwards, or Gore is in second place, but at this point Clinton holds strong leads over all.

GAUGING CLINTON'S ELECTABILITY

Although many seem to hone in on the question of whether the American people are ready for a female president, polling, most recently conducted by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*, suggests that it is not a problem. To the extent that Clinton is controversial, much more among Republicans and independents than Democrats, it is more about her than her gender. Voters have long elected women to state legislatures and the House of Representatives and more recently to the Senate.

The recently rising numbers of women elected to major executive posts, such as governor, in unexpected states such as Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas suggest that the stumbling blocks are falling, one by one. The debate about a woman as president has centered on the job's role as commander in chief and whether a woman is tough enough. Moving beyond the issue of gender stereotypes, there may or may not be good reasons not to elect Clinton as president, but not being tough enough would not seem to be one of them.

The more important issue for Clinton is electability, a factor that will likely be enormously important in each party's nomination decision. With strong favorability ratings within her party, there is no question the vast majority of Democrats like Clinton, many would not mind her being president, and many fervently hope that she will be. Clinton's biggest obstacle is convincing her party that she can win a general election. With the country more polarized than at any time in modern history, neither party wants to risk nominating a loser. That certainly applies to the Democrats, who won two consecutive presidential elections in 1992 and 1996, only to lose the most recent two by very narrow margins. Democrats know that Clinton is polarizing and controversial among independent voters and particularly among Republican voters. Is she so controversial that she cannot win a general election? Will those suspicions convince Democrats not to nominate her?

Clinton is the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination.

The *Cook Political Report* and RT Strategies tested this in four polls in 2006. Democratic voters were asked, "Thinking about Hillary Clinton, which of the following two statements comes closer to your opinion: If Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee, I am worried that she cannot win the election for president, or if Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee, she'll have as good a chance as any Democratic nominee to be elected president." (The sequence of questions was alternated.) In February and August 2006, Democratic voters were very evenly split. In February, 47 percent thought that Clinton would have as good of a chance as anyone, and 46 percent worried that she could not win a general election. In August, 49 percent worried she could not win, and 46 percent thought that she would have as good of a chance as any.

That statistic changed rather dramatically in November and December 2006. In both months, 60 percent thought that she would have as good of a chance as any other candidate. In November, 36 percent worried that she could not win a general election, and this number dropped to 33 percent in December. The replication of the November numbers a month later assures that something has changed. It could well be that Democrats were suffering from low self-esteem prior to the 2006 midterm election, having lost two straight presidential elections as well as Senate and House seats in two consecutive elections. After winning majorities in the Senate and House and of the governorships, Democrats might be feeling more confident, aggressive, and comfortable that Clinton could win.

Will these numbers hold up over time? No one knows if Obama, Edwards, or any other Democrat can build up numbers that can rival Clinton for the affec-

tion of party members. For now, although all the attention has been on Obama, it might well be Clinton whose political fortunes have really improved.

OBAMA-MANIA

With Obama now running, the contest for the Democratic nomination will likely narrow down to a two- or three-way contest among Clinton, Obama, and possibly Edwards, with any remaining candidates struggling to raise money, garner media attention, and attract the key campaign operatives who know how to win presidential elections. Unless Obama trips up early, creating

an opening for one of the others, these others would likely wither and die on the vine. Edwards has enough residual name recognition and goodwill leftover from his 2004 race as the vice presidential running mate, particularly in the key early state of Iowa, home of the first caucus, where he currently is in first place. For the rest, however, the climb will be exceedingly steep.

Obama's challenge is not his skin color, it is his experience.

Although so many focus on the question of whether the United States is ready for an African-American candidate, the same NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll mentioned earlier showed that being an African-American was not a significant obstacle to getting elected. Obama's challenge is not his skin color, it is his experience. Many argue that, with Obama having just left the Illinois state senate in 2004 after his election to the U.S. Senate, under a rather unusual set of circumstances involving frontrunners for each party's nomination sidelined with scandals, allowing Obama to win the seat with little effort, he simply has too little experience to run for president, let alone be president. Although he is obviously enormously bright, talented, and impressive to virtually everyone, is he ready for the job so often referred to as the "leader of the free world"?

Moreover, Obama is seen as an African-American John F. Kennedy. It is doubtful that even Kennedy could live up to the standard that has been created for him in martyrdom. Could anyone measure up to the idyllic standard to which Obama will be held? Should the fact that he has yet to win a tough race or, politically speaking, has never taken a punch weigh into the equation?

The contrary argument is that this is his time. Obama was the only Democrat who was in greater demand to campaign for Democratic candidates during the 2006 midterm elections than former president Bill Clinton. A cacophony of voices urged him to run. Democratic Party leaders report that when it is announced that Obama will appear at a fundraising event or rally, the expected

attendance doubles or triples. Many in the crowds are not the usual faces, but newcomers yearning for the excitement that Obama generates.

CLINTON AND THE FIELD

A race among Clinton, Obama, and Edwards will most likely leave little room for anyone else. Others will scarcely be noticed unless one of the frontrunners falters very early. If Obama falters, the race will likely come down to Clinton and an alternative to Clinton, with the competition between other contenders to be that alternative. The competition for the Democratic nomination will be similar to an NCAA basketball tournament bracket, with one bracket for Clinton and one for everyone else, with the final game between Clinton and the victor of that other bracket.

By virtue of his early lead in Iowa, head start from the 2004 campaign, and ample fundraising ability, Edwards joins Obama as a favorite in that other bracket, but he will still have to fight to retain that status. Although Edwards walked away from the 2004 race with goodwill and high marks, that cannot be said for Kerry. He sank even lower with a comment late in the 2006 midterm election campaign that was widely seen as one of the biggest blunders by any politician that year and convinced any remaining doubters that Kerry's time has come and gone.

The Republican Nomination Contest

Notwithstanding Giuliani's initial lead over other Republicans in most polls, the consensus is that McCain is the frontrunner for the GOP nod, with Romney his chief rival. Gingrich usually runs fourth in polls that include Giuliani, third in ones that do not, and the rest fall well behind these front four.

GIULIANI'S VIABILITY

The public holds obviously divergent views on Giuliani. Some hold the image of the courageous federal prosecutor turned mayor of New York City who provided strong leadership after the September 11 tragedy. This image has catapulted him to the top of many polls for the GOP nomination. Yet, political professionals are quick to point out that, although many admire Giuliani, his leadership, and what he represents, his pro-choice stand on abortion and past support for gun control and gay rights make it almost impossible for him to win a GOP nomination.

Although the social and cultural conservatives in the GOP may not dictate the party's presidential nominee, they certainly are sufficiently potent to veto

someone. It would be difficult for someone on the wrong side of one of their litmus-test issues to win a nomination, very difficult for a candidate opposed to them on two issues, and almost unfathomable for a nominee that supports what they see as the trifecta of cultural liberalism. It is not difficult to imagine that the “independent” groups that ran 30-second attack ads on Kerry in 2004 would vilify Giuliani before the party base.

Giuliani is very well positioned to run as an independent.

Giuliani is making all of the prerequisite preparations, but most political professionals doubt his viability in a GOP nomination fight and wonder if he really is in the fight to stay. Ironically, Giuliani is very well positioned to run as an independent. He is one of the few political figures who could qualify for ballots in all 50 states, raise sufficient money, and have the name recognition and image to run competitively between the two ideological and partisan lines where most voters are congregated. There are no signs that he is contemplating this course of action, but it would seem imminently more plausible than winning the conservative party's nomination with positions that are remarkably not conservative.

McCain's Default Candidacy

Although he is hardly a favorite of conservatives, McCain's situation is intriguing. Voting record analyses typically show McCain voting with a majority of his party in the Senate upward of 90 percent of the time. His maverick style and tendency to pick high-profile issues, such as treatment of terrorist suspects and detainee rights, virtually guarantee that when he does stray off the reservation, it gets a great deal of attention. It is this style and his unusually friendly relationship with the media that usually engender a great deal of skepticism among many conservatives, some of whom assume that McCain is a moderate or worse, although they usually have few specific issues on which to back up those positions.

Under normal circumstances, this could be a real problem, but one common thread through the fights for each party's nomination is that of electability. Although neither party is likely to make huge ideological compromises in the name of electability, such as Democrats picking a conservative or Republicans choosing a liberal, both will likely nominate someone who is widely seen as competitive in a general election, yet not antithetical to their party's base.

McCain is a package of strengths and weaknesses. He has a great deal of experience in Congress and the military, is widely seen as a freethinker who rises above party lines and as an adult at a point in history when there is no time

for on-the-job training. Some of his potential weaknesses are related to age and health. McCain will turn 72 years old on August 28, 2008, and if elected, he will be older than Ronald Reagan was when he became president in 1981 and thus become the oldest newly elected president in history. He has also had a physically tougher life than most, including more than five years of torture in a Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp and three bouts with skin cancer. A recent NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, among others, shows a considerable degree of concern among voters about electing a president who is more than 70 years old.

The second potential, major stumbling block for McCain might be the war in Iraq. Although there are no signs that it has caused him any difficulty among GOP voters, his undiluted support for the war and advocacy of sending even more troops runs afoul with most voters. It might well cause a drop in his support among independent voters and diminish his support among Democrats, not an insignificant factor as a key attractiveness of McCain is his ability to draw crossover voters. Will that crossover ability hold? Even with these problems, McCain still remains the frontrunner for the GOP nomination.

IS ROMNEY FOR REAL?

Romney is clearly one of the smartest and most impressive elected officials to appear on the national stage. Moreover, he, like McCain, has put together an impressive team of campaign operatives that could easily take him the distance. One potential shortcoming for Romney is his faith. He is certainly not the first Mormon to seek the presidency. His father, Michigan governor George Romney (R), sought the GOP presidential nomination in 1968 and Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) made a brief bid in 1996 for the Republican nomination as well. Senator Morris Udall (D-Ariz.) sought the Democratic nomination twice, and Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.), although not running for president, is the first Mormon to serve as the Democratic majority leader. Yet, these presidential candidates all preceded the greater integration of religion and politics of recent years, particularly in the Republican Party. Many therefore speculate that it could be a stumbling block for Romney. Initial polling on the question suggests that this is not nearly as big of an obstacle for Romney as previously anticipated, but it is something to keep an eye on.

A more immediate concern for Romney is how he finesses some apparent shifts in his positions on social and cultural issues. In his first bid for public office, challenging incumbent Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) for Massachusetts's Senate seat in 1994, Romney positioned himself as a pro-choice, moderate Republican holding fairly moderate to liberal positions on gay rights. Over the last four years as governor of Massachusetts, he has moved considerably

to his right on these issues. He appears to be positioning himself as the major candidate most directly appealing to social conservatives, an interesting move because they are the ones that might be least comfortable with a Mormon candidate due to theological differences. Like McCain's potential problems, it is unclear how serious these issues are and if they are deal breakers.

THE REST OF THE PACK?

Gingrich has said that he will decide on his candidacy in September 2007 when he sees how other candidates have fared. He reasons that his name recognition, ability to raise money, and position in the party afford him the luxury of waiting longer than most, but September might be pushing his luck. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Republican race is that, although traditional conservatives such as Brownback, Gilmore, Hunter, and Tancredo are certainly contemplating bids, none are currently expected to be in the top tier of GOP contenders. There is no apparent heir to the Ronald Reagan–George W. Bush ideological lineage anywhere near the top. Former senator George Allen (R-Va.) was expected to fill that role, but his tough race and reelection loss in November 2006 have removed him from front contention.

General Election: Too Soon to Tell

The problem with early general-election presidential polls is that they often reflect little more than a combination of partisanship and name recognition with a dash of favorability or unfavorability. Perhaps the more useful yardstick is looking at the last two presidential elections. In 2000, Democrats very narrowly won the popular vote, and the GOP won the electoral college vote even more narrowly. In 2004, Kerry still garnered 48.3 percent of the popular vote and lost the electoral vote by less than 119,000 votes in Ohio out of 5.6 million cast in that state.

The country is exceptionally evenly divided, and party-line voting is running at near record-high levels. Routinely, 90 percent or more of Democratic voters are casting their ballots for Democrats, and 90 percent or more of GOP voters are casting their ballots for Republicans. The narrow slice of true independents, those that do not lean to one party or the other, are typically under 20 percent of the voting population.

The most logical matchup at this very early stage is Clinton versus McCain. Both candidates are well known and well defined and are very plausible nominees for their respective parties. In national polling of registered voters for the *Cook Political Report* by RT Strategies, McCain sported a 12-point lead on Clinton in February 2006, 48 percent to 36 percent. In April, McCain's

lead had dropped to 9 percentage points, 46 percent to 37 percent, and in June to 7 percentage points, 47 percent to 40 percent. By November, just after the midterm election, the McCain advantage was down to just 2 percentage points, 44 percent to 42 percent, and to a single percentage point, 40 percent to 39 percent, in mid-December.

To a certain extent, this may have very little to do with Clinton or McCain themselves. Pollsters in each party concede that the Republican Party's brand has been tarnished over the last year by the controversy surrounding the war in Iraq and to a lesser extent by scandals, so it should not be surprising that the GOP brand would become something of a burden for a presidential candidate in a hypothetical trial heat. That probably contributed to the narrowing McCain advantage. Now that Republicans no longer control Congress, creating shared accountability in Washington, this might change. It is also true, however, that McCain has positioned himself more conservatively than before, which might also be costing him crossover support. He has engaged in some highly publicized outreach efforts to, among others, Reverend Jerry Falwell, speaking at a commencement address at Falwell's Liberty University last year. Not surprisingly, McCain, who had drawn 17 percent of the Democratic vote in February 2006, pulled just 10 percent in the November and December polls.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when handicapping the nomination contests early is that they rarely play out exactly as anticipated. Even to the extent that the early frontrunners often win, there are usually twists and turns along the way that no one would have expected and can sometimes alter the outcome of the fight. No one will know who the candidates within each party will be until the winter or spring of 2008 or who each party's nominee will be until late that summer. The state of the economy and the war in Iraq, not to mention what new issues will have developed by then and which party those issues will benefit or hurt, is totally unknown. A prudent forecast would be that the general election will be hard fought and the result close and very likely to turn on circumstances and developments that one has no way of anticipating today—but you can count on it being close.

McCain would be the oldest newly elected president in history.