Does it Matter Who the GOP Nominates?
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Republicans are wondering a lot these days, wondering if it might be Rudy or McCain or Romney or, perhaps, Thompson whom they will nominate. But maybe they should be wondering about something else instead. Maybe they should be wondering if it matters at all whom they nominate.

Substantial political history suggests it might not matter. It might not because 2008 might not be their year.

Start with the obvious. President Bush is on the political ropes. In truth, it seems a testing moment for him. His approval rating barely reaches 30 percent. Worse than a lamed duck, he has become a maimed duck, virtually unable to influence important events.

Moreover, Bush’s political problems have now spread to his party. Polls tell us that Democrats have opened up as much as a 15-point lead in party identification, a nadir not seen by the GOP since the hellish Watergate days of the 1970s. Voters are not just unhappy with Bush, they are deserting his party as well.

Equally foreboding for Republicans, the increasingly creaky Reagan coalition has become a pale shadow of its former self. Key issues such as immigration and Iraq are opening major fissures among Republicans, while their once vaunted values bloc seems less politically motivated. Out of favor with voters, Republicans increasingly seem out of sorts with themselves.

Grim as things now seem for Republicans, the recent past wasn’t much better. The GOP suffered an ominous defeat in the 2006 midterm elections. A midterm defeat of that magnitude is a leading political indicator that points menacingly to a change in party control of the White House in 2008.

Presidential history likewise tells us that 2008 should be a Democratic year. The Republican candidate will be running for a third consecutive term after Bush’s two terms. Consecutive third party terms are notoriously difficult to win. Excepting the New Deal period, third terms have been realized only three times since the Grant Administration: by Republicans William Howard Taft (1908), Herbert Hoover (1928), and George H.W. Bush (1988). All three of these succeeded enormously popular presidents who were retiring. No one has ever won a third consecutive term succeeding an unpopular president.

In view of this, can the Republicans win in 2008? Certainly the election is still some 15 months away--more than enough time in which something might happen to change the outlook. One something that could happen is that Democrats could again display their unmatched virtuosity for nominating weak and ineffectual candidates, as they did most lately with Gore in 2000 and Kerry in 2004. Then all bets are off, and Republicans could retain the White House.

But barring the implausible, does the GOP have any chance to win in 2008?

They probably do. But if it comes about, it will be foreign policy or national security that turns the trick. This conclusion rests on the widely shared view among historians and political scientists that presidential elections...
tend to turn on two major issues: how good is the economy, and how successful is foreign policy/national
security?

Currently the economy, as generally measured, is healthy if not hearty. Normally that would be a plus for
Republicans but probably not in 2008. That same healthy economy did not help them hold onto Congress in
2006, nor is it helping them much now in the polls. So it’s reasonable to believe that the economy alone won’t
pull the GOP out of its rut, indeed, a sudden downturn might prove a mortal wound.

That leaves foreign policy/national security as the GOP’s trump card. A resolution of Iraq could help them, but
history suggests even that would be no silver bullet. Progress toward resolution of an unpopular war wasn’t
enough to save the Democrats in 1952 when Korea carried Eisenhower home a winner. Nor was it enough for
Democrats in 1968 when Nixon used his "secret plan" to convince voters only he could get the country out of
Vietnam.

National Security; however, is another matter. Republicans still poll well on their handling of national security.
In fact, national security looms as the only arena in which the party can unequivocally define itself for voters.
How might this dynamic play out in a presidential race? The unthinkable, another major terrorist attack on
American soil, would probably have profound, if unclear impacts on the 2008 race. It has to be counted as a
major wild card in 2008. Less ambiguous is a clear national security triumph for the GOP. Certainly any
thwarted terrorist attack might help the Republican Party regain credibility with voters.

But neither breakthroughs in foreign policy nor national security successes may be enough in 2008. Foreign
policy, so linked to Iraq, may be irredeemable for the GOP. Similarly, national security scenarios offer at least
as much risk for them as it does reward.

Nevertheless, foreign policy and national security are the cards the GOP must play. Even with them, their
chances are slim, but slim is better than none and without a foreign policy or national security triumph, none is
what they have now.

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