Are Republicans Flipping Their Wigs?

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Some articles make a point; this simply raises one. Why are national Republicans having such a hard time finding a presidential candidate that can beat Obama?

It’s not for lack of trying. At least nine credible Republican candidates have announced for president over the past year, many traveling feverishly around the country, courting primary voters and engaging in high profile debates - all seemingly to no avail. Instead the GOP primary has become a high stakes game of musical chairs, with one GOP aspirant after another first grabbing public attention, briskly moving up in the polls, then fading away days or weeks later.

Former governor Romney led most early polls until concerns about his conservative credentials and ties to "Obama-care" dragged him down. Following Romney was a short lived Palin hysteria that gripped Republicans during the summer before the former governor made it clear she was more of a tease than a serious candidate. Attention then turned to Congresswoman Bachmann for a while until she found herself a bit too quotable. Thereafter it swung to Texas governor Rick Perry, who parachuted into the race in August.

When Perry’s debate performance raised questions about his presidential stature, the spotlight moved briefly to the previously obscure Hermann Cain after he won an even more obscure Florida straw poll. Most recently, anguished pleas were made to New Jersey’s Governor Chris Christie, who declined. Still lurking in the wings are other late entry possibilities, George Pataki and Rudy Giuliani.

Meanwhile, the GOP’s putative opponent, Barack Obama, seems to sink ever further in public esteem as well as the polls. Rarely in American history has an incumbent this late in an election cycle been weaker than Obama appears now, and still lack a strong opponent.

Recent Quinnipiac poll results in Pennsylvania confirm the paradox. While an ominous 54% of voters disapprove of the job Obama is doing, he is still beating all of his Republican rivals in polling match-ups. A president with an anemic job approval in the 40% range is still winning the election.

Worse, perhaps, Republican voters seem nonplussed by their own candidates. In the same poll, Romney leads with an unimpressive 18% of GOP voters, followed by Perry at 16%. Far outdistancing both are “don’t knows” that are undecided or just don’t like any of them.

Certainly we have had weak incumbents before in American presidential history. In modern times we might list Truman (1952), Johnson (1968), Ford (1976), Carter (1980) and Bush (1992). Two simply declined to run for re-election (Truman and Johnson). The other three, however, did run; Ford, Carter, and Bush, subsequently attracted strong opponents and eventually lost. The clear principle is that weak incumbents attract strong opponents.
But that isn’t happening this year. Instead opposition Republicans seem badly divided, uncertain, fractious and without clear direction. Presented with an historic opportunity to defeat an incumbent president and perhaps control Congress, they seem uncertain as to the qualities and policies they want in a candidate.

Why?

Some might point to the coalitional nature of America’s two-party system. Both parties sometimes struggle when their dissimilar constituencies fail to resolve inevitable conflicts. The GOP had such a moment in 1912 when it renominated William Howard Taft and Democrats had one in 1972 when they nominated George McGovern.

But something else could be happening much more menacing for Republicans. The ascendancy of the Tea Party together with the continuing power of social conservatives may be unraveling the loose coalition that sustained Republicans the past 40 years. Increasingly the GOP is a party concerned with values in a country preoccupied with economics, a party obsessed with ideology in a country absorbed in finding practical solution to its myriad problems.

Much of this has been apparent in Congress since 2010. It is now coming to be reflected in the presidential election. Could the Republican Party be having trouble picking a nominee because it’s in the process of coming apart as a national party?

As starkly unlikely as this seems, it has occurred before in national history. Ironically enough it happened to the Republican’s predecessor party, the Whigs, which existed from the early 1830s until just before the Civil War. And it was a value question that doomed the Whigs, just as it is now value questions that confront Republicans. Whigs were ultimately undone by strife over the expansion of slavery. Deep divisions within the Whigs prevented them in 1852 from nominating their own incumbent president, sending the party into a death spiral that eventually produced the modern Republican Party.

Is the Whig’s history fated also to befall its Republican successors? While this question can be raised, it’s much too early to answer it.

The Whigs decline was precipitated by a debate over slavery, a debate that led to the Civil War, a national tragedy with no parallel in our history. Moreover, these sorts of intra-party conflicts such as Republicans are experiencing tend to occur from time to time without the ruinous effects that destroyed the Whigs in the 1850s. Indeed modern Republicans have proved ingenious in resolving discord and discovering consensus among its disparate interests.

Still it must be noted that we seem to be heading for one of the most bizarre elections in memory. By almost every political measure, Republicans should be confident, united, and on their way to a comfortable win in 2012. Right now, they aren’t.

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