Is the GOP Field Weak? Or Is Obama Strong?
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It’s an enduring puzzle.

On the one hand, Barack Obama seems like a big fat target for his political enemies. Some 18 months before the next election, his job approval ratings remain low, the economy still struggles, foreign policy challenges remain, two wars continue, and the national debt is soaring. Often the question seems, “Can this guy finish out his term?” And not, “Can he be reelected to another one?”

On the other hand, there is little evidence so far that Republicans can beat him in 2012. The GOP field, to understate it considerably, is not quite ready for prime time. Over half of GOP voters aren’t happy with it. It’s indisputably a weak field, populated by perennials with major weaknesses—Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Michele Bachmann, and Rick Santorum—or by candidates all but unknown outside their respective states—Tim Pawlenty, Herman Cain, Jon Huntsman, and Buddy Roemer.

Large it surely is. Impressively it surely isn’t.

And so we have the “Obama puzzle.” Why does a troubled incumbent fail to attract strong opponents? Why is the GOP field so weak?

The question suggests more than one possible answer. Maybe not everyone has shown up for the party yet. A dark horse could emerge. Or today’s flawed candidates may become tomorrow’s flawless candidates once the campaign really begins. Or maybe Obama’s problems will become so huge that anyone with a steady pulse can beat him. That unfortunately has happened once or twice in American politics.

All of these are possible. But none of them is very probable. The field of challengers is likely complete at this late date, while flawed candidates tend to become more flawed during campaigns. Then too, Obama’s worst days are probably behind him as the economy slowly improves and foreign policy looms less out of control.

But there is a better answer to the Obama puzzle, a principle culled from over two centuries of American presidential campaigns. It is this: the strength of the field of challengers is often a leading indicator of where the campaign is heading. It’s usually strong when the incumbent president is weak and usually weak when the incumbent is strong. In short, history may be sending us a message. And that message is that Obama is going to look much stronger by the time Election Day 2012 rolls around.

Recent presidents, from Truman to Eisenhower to Reagan to Clinton, often appeared weak around midterm but then recovered sufficiently to win a second term. History provides many examples of presidents who started weak but finished strong.

Furthermore, the historical evidence is abundant that a field of weak challengers forecasts a strong incumbent and vice versa.
In just the past 100 years, fourteen incumbent presidents have run for reelection (all for second terms, except Franklin Roosevelt). Five of them lost and nine won. The five who lost—William Taft (1912), Herbert Hoover (1932), Gerald Ford (1976), Jimmy Carter (1980), and George H.W. Bush Sr. (1992)—were ipso facto weak incumbents. All but one faced a field of unusually strong challengers. Taft probably drew the strongest opponents in history, running against one former president and one future president. Hoover’s main opponent was Franklin Roosevelt, the only president in history to serve more than two terms. Carter had to run against Ronald Reagan and Bush against Bill Clinton. Only Ford in 1976 drew what can remotely be called a weak field of challengers. The principle: weak incumbents draw strong rivals.

But is the opposite also true? Do weak opponents forecast strong incumbents? Yes, but there are exceptions. Nine incumbents won reelection in the past 100 years: Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush.

At least two, Wilson (1916) and Truman (1948), who were not perceived to be strong during their campaigns, attracted strong opponents and only barely won. The other seven won victories against relatively weak fields. The majority of these elections—Roosevelt (1936, 1940, 1944), Eisenhower (1956), Johnson (1964), and Reagan (1984)—were virtual blowouts with not much more than token opposition against ultimately victorious incumbents.

So the principle apparently is that weak opponents usually forecast strong incumbents. But alas, politics isn’t quite science. While weak incumbents almost always draw a strong field of challengers, strong incumbents sometimes also face strong challengers.

Where does this leave us looking forward to 2012?

History suggests that a weak field of challengers like the GOP’s present crop augurs not well for the out party. In general, the weaker the incumbent is, the stronger the challengers, and the stronger the incumbent, the weaker the challengers.

This historical pattern may assure some Democrats and dismay some Republicans. But both sides should remember that presidential campaigns are drawn out, unpredictable affairs. This one has a long way to go.

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