It’s an ill wind that blows no good and a rare political season that brings no lessons. Here are six salient teaching moments inspired by the finally concluded Republican presidential contest. Some are familiar; a few are surprising and all together reveal much about American politics entering the second decade of a still young century.

1. **Debates do Matter**
Until 2012, the conventional wisdom was that debates rarely influenced presidential primaries. This year, however, some twenty debates proved otherwise. In state after state, majorities of voters told pollsters that the debates helped them make up their mind. Moreover, debates were often touchstone events as when then leading candidate Rick Perry’s inept debates doomed his candidacy or Newt Gingrich repeatedly resuscitated his campaign with bravo performances, or surging Mitt Romney repeatedly torpedoed himself with ill-considered remarks and awkward statements. Overall, the debates might be the leading reason for the competitiveness of the race, offering virtually every candidate, regardless of financial resources, the opportunity to emerge as front runner.

2. **Negative Advertising Still Works**
Negative advertising is the perennial campaign tactic that voters most love to hate. But every election cycle teaches again just how effective it can be. We may hate it but we pay attention to it, process it deeply, and often vote based on it. Newt Gingrich was perhaps the first candidate this time that relearned that truth. He initially tried to remain positive, was consequently defeated decisively and then “went negative” achieving some victories. Rick Santorum in this cycle was probably the most frequent victim of negative advertising, plummeted in state after state by Mitt Romney. In fact, Romney of all the candidates both understood the role of negative advertising and possessed the resources to use it effectively.

3. **Super-Pac’s have fundamentally altered presidential politics**
Money in the form of campaign contributions has always been the vital resource in nomination battles. But pre-2012 that vital resource typically came from a broad base of donors, arriving only as long as one was winning and continuing to win. Alas when one began to lose, those campaign contributions dried up fast. In consequence, no longer truly viable candidates, were forced to drop out because they no longer could finance their campaign. That’s a major reason modern nomination contests had usually ended quickly. Super-Pac’s, however, changed this dynamic dramatically. Now wealthy supporters can send a Super-Pac a check for five million (or 50 million) and keep an otherwise flailing candidacy alive indefinitely. A constituency of one is now enough to make a candidate viable and Super-Pac’s have become the new wild card in presidential politics.
4. **Protracted nomination fights hurt Republicans**
President Obama’s sweeping 2008 victory after a long, vigorous, sometimes nasty primary fight with Hillary Clinton inspired many to conclude long primary seasons were good for a party. Such a conclusion, however, is specious. It’s true that Democrats occasionally combine contested primaries with ultimate fall victories. One example is 2008, Another is 1960. But more often, bitter nomination battles weaken both parties. It’s true that Democrats may fare better than Republicans in surviving party squabbles. But there is no compelling evidence that either party benefits from prolonged pre-nomination conflict. In the past century the GOP has hosted five such contests, ultimately losing the general election in all but one instance. Historically, when Republican’s don’t reach early consensus, they also don’t do well in the General Election.

5. **Social issues backfire when voters worry about the economy**
In focusing his campaign on social and other non-economic issues, Rick Santorum energized a powerful constituency within the Republican Party. But his campaign ultimately failed because economic issues always trump social issues during troubled economy times. Indeed, Republican voters in poll after poll indicated it was the economy and jobs they cared most about, over any of an array of non-economic issues, ranging from contraceptives to immigration. Now, with the nomination in reach, Romney will be forced to deal with Santorum’s energized social constituency even as he attempts to woo moderate suburban voters essential to his election. Not surprisingly, Obama has benefited from the foray into social issues, gaining a substantial edge among women voters.

6. **Electability is the new mantra of nomination politics**
Nominating a candidate that can win in the fall has always mattered to primary voters. But it has not always been the only element that mattered. In 1964, for example, Republicans courted electoral disaster nominating Barry Goldwater. Democrats returned the favor in 1972 nominating George McGovern. Both examples illustrate years in which ideological movements within the parties dictated nominees who couldn’t win. But not this year! Even while GOP primary voters in state after state were struggling to agree on their nominee, they eventually and resoundingly agreed that “electability” was the most important quality in a nominee – more important than character, experience, policy positions, or conservative credentials. Republican’s may or may not win the presidency in 2012. But GOP voters chose their nominee precisely because they believed he could do that.

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