Some of the names are familiar—Romney, Huckabee, Palin, Gingrich, Paul, Trump. Others are less familiar—Bachman, Barbour, Pawlenty, Daniels, Santorum. While still others are largely unknown—Huntsman, Johnson, Cain, Thune, Roemer, Pence. What they all share in common, however, is their membership in the largest class of GOP presidential aspirants in more than 40 years. Not since 1968 has the Republican Party produced such a bumper crop of presidential contenders.

The question raised by the plenitude of GOP candidates is an obvious one: will it matter? Will the eventual nominee emerge after a spirited battle from an open competition across a field of some twenty hopefuls? Or will the Republicans do what they almost always do—nominate the guy (so far, only guys) “whose turn it is.”

The historical record is tediously consistent. In fair times and foul—in open or incumbent-held seats—national Republicans behave very much like local Rotarians. They pick the next in line. Indeed, it’s remarkable how consistent they have become, almost never going off the grid or out of the box, as Democrats often do. Even a cursory glance at modern history makes this clear.

In 2008, Republicans picked McCain, the runner up for the nomination to Bush in 2000. Then in 2000, they picked Bush, the son of a former president. In 1996, they picked Bob Dole, Ford’s vice presidential running mate in 1976 and Senate majority leader. In 1988, they selected George Herbert Walker Bush, who had been Reagan’s vice president. In 1980, they picked Reagan, who had been the runner-up for the nomination to Ford in 1976. Then in 1976, they chose Ford, the unelected incumbent president, for their nominee. In 1972, they picked their 1960 nominee, Nixon. And in 1952, they chose Eisenhower, a warhero.

One could go on with the examples, back to Dewey in 1944 and 1948, and even far back as Hoover in 1928 and Harding in 1920. Election after election, nomination after nomination, the GOP selects a conventional, predictable, and usually “safe” nominee, regardless of the size of the field, the context of the election, or even the likely Democratic opponent.

Except once!

In 1940, with the country still trying to overcome the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt running for an unprecedented third term, and war raging in Europe, the GOP flabbergasted everyone. They nominated the darkest of dark horses, Wendell Willkie, a candidate virtually unknown to most Americans and someone who had not even been a Republican a year earlier. In May 1940, three percent of Americans supported Willkie; by late June, he was the Republican nominee.

Not that the establishment figures were absent in 1940. New York District Attorney Thomas Dewey, who went on to collect two nominations in later years, fought for it, as did two U.S. Senators, Robert Vandenber
Robert Taft. And in the mix was Pennsylvania’s favorite son, Governor Arthur James. But the Willkie grassroots movement that developed at the convention was so powerful conventional political forces could not stop it.

Could 2012 play out like 1940? Could a wild nomination fight emerge? Will the 2012 Republicans go rouge like their 1940 counterparts did and end up picking someone completely unexpected?

Certainly some striking parallels are present. In both years the nation confronted foreign peril and economic turbulence; in both years the incumbent president was a polarizing figure; and in both years the Republican nomination was wide open without an obvious front runner or consensus choice.

Moreover, 2012 adds to these factors a political wild card of immense importance. Two years before the election, the largest potential field of competing GOP candidates in party history is emerging—each with essentially the same message and none offering voters an obvious choice.

Is it possible than that a Donald Trump or even a Michelle Bachman could end up the GOP nominee? Maybe, but that might be going too far. The nomination process now is very different than in 1940. Primaries and caucuses are determinant, and conventions no longer matter. Clearly there is still time for a traditional GOP establishment figure to distance himself or herself from the herd.

Nevertheless, the forces that might produce a surprise or unknown nominee are imposing. Not since 1940 has the Republican Party positioned itself so strongly to nominate an unlikely presidential candidate. At the minimum, we can say at this early point that candidates like Trump or Bachman—candidates often described as the “fringes” in other years—now have a better shot at the brass ring than in almost a century.

Whether that is good news or bad news for the GOP is unclear. In 1940, it was decidedly bad news. Roosevelt, despite unrest in his own party, lingering economic distress, and widespread fear of a foreign war, creamed Willkie in the Electoral College, 449 to 82. Willkie himself never held public office, appointed or elected, making him the only major party presidential nominee in American history to not do so. And had Willkie defeated Roosevelt, he would not have completed his term. He died in 1944, as did his vice presidential running mate.

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