

A Republican Primary with No Real Competition

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With less than two weeks before the Iowa caucus, the media has continued to miss the major story about the Republican primary season. The most striking aspect of this primary season has not been the search by many conservative voters for an alternative to Mitt Romney, the rise and fall of candidates like Rick Perry or Herman Cain, the emergence of ignorance of major issues as a credential for the nomination as demonstrated by Cain and Michele Bachmann, or even the persistent appeal of Ron Paul among some in the Republican Party.

Rather, the main story of the Republican primary season has been that the race has been extraordinarily uncompetitive. Despite the absence of a Republican incumbent or even sitting vice president, the sense among many in the Party that President Obama is very vulnerable and a base energized by the Republican victories in the 2010 midterm election, Mitt Romney has been the front runner for the nomination almost since the day John McCain lost in 2008. With two weeks to go before the first votes are cast, he still occupies that position.

There have been some potential candidates who could have changed this, but Mitch Daniels and Chris Christie, for example, chose not to run, while Perry proved a far stronger candidate on paper than in reality. Most of the rest of the candidates, like Bachmann, Cain and Newt Gingrich seemed to be running to make a point or raise their profiles rather than to try to win. Their lack of interest in raising money or building organizations is evidence of this. Moreover, other than Romney and Jon Huntsman, the other Republican candidates are all axiomatically unelectable. In previous campaigns it was not unusual to have one candidate who had extremist views and was potentially popular but was unelectable. This year it seems like other than Romney, and Huntsman who has yet to break through to the electorate, all the Republican candidates fit this description.

The media is often accused of focusing too much on the horserace angle of presidential campaigns rather than on substantive differences between the candidates. This year, the media has, as usual, focused on the horserace angle, but they have still managed to get it wrong. By covering this race as if it were a normal Republican primary campaign with several legitimate candidates representing different demographic or ideological groups within the party, the media has largely overlooked a number of more interesting and more relevant questions. The failure of the right wing of the Republican Party to find a candidate who is even remotely electable, the persistence of the more moderate wing of the Republican Party despite the visibility of the Tea Party and others on the far right, the inability of all the candidates other than Romney to put together even a second rate campaign are all interesting stories that have barely been addressed.

Instead of examining these questions, the media has contorted itself in its effort to make it seem like there is a real race by trying to pass people like Bachmann and Cain off as plausible candidates or to treat the Gingrich boomlet as evidence that Gingrich's ideas are resonating with

voters, rather than as yet another effort by Republicans who are dissatisfied with Romney to turn to an unelectable and unprepared candidate.

The attention on Iowa where currently, Gingrich, Paul and Romney are the three leading candidates, all with a chance of winning has buoyed the illusion of competition in the Republican primary. However, regardless of who wins the Iowa caucus, Romney will win in New Hampshire and head to the next round of primaries with more money, and probably more delegates, than any other candidate.

In some respects it is not a big deal that the media has chosen to cover the primary as if it were competitive when it is not, but it is damaging. By treating people like Cain, Bachmann, Gingrich and even occasionally Rick Santorum as serious people making genuine efforts to become president, the media makes the extremist and confrontational rhetoric of all these candidates seem more legitimate, when the central lesson of 2012 is that candidates with these radical views have been unable to make themselves appealing either to ordinary voters or to the wealthy right wing interests that have, in recent years, backed the Tea Party and other far right movements. This suggests most voters have little appetite for aggressive homophobia, foreign policy drawn from a toxic brew of jingoism and ignorance of the rest of the world, and economic policy that consists largely of calling anybody who wants wealthy people to pay their fair share a socialist. Covering this may not be as exciting as imagining scenarios where Perry, Gingrich and Romney will slug it out until the convention, but it would be a more honest way to report on the race.