

Can Trump, Cruz Win Over GOP's "Four Factions"?

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/12/10/can_trump_cruz_win_over_gops_four_factions_128987.html

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

December 10, 2015

Republicans who actually want their party to win the White House next year are increasingly worried.

When billionaire businessman and reality TV star Donald Trump shot to the lead in the polls shortly after announcing his candidacy last June, it was sensible to calm anxious conservatives by reminding them that the race had just begun, the first primaries were half a year away, and Trump was bound to implode. With less than eight weeks until the Iowa caucuses, and with Trump holding commanding leads in that state, in New Hampshire, and nationally, worries appear justified.

Meanwhile, freshman Sen. Ted Cruz—who has built an impressive ground game in the South and who is gaining in the polls as neurosurgeon Ben Carson sheds support—claims to be the one true conservative while denigrating fellow GOP candidates for their supposed deviations from the faith. That may prove a successful formula for victory in a fractious, closely contested race for the nomination. It's unlikely to produce victory in a general election, especially when a minority of American voters identifies with your party.

Republicans less taken with bullying bloviation and doctrinal purity might derive comfort from the 2008 and 2012 Republican primary season. In December 2007, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani was the frontrunner; by March 2008 he was a has-been. In December 2011, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the eventual nominee, was struggling to gain traction in a crowded field. These recent races suggest that candidates' standing in the run-up to primary voting is a poor predictor of the party's nominee.

Another source of comfort for conservatives convinced that compromise and conciliation are essential to the vindication of political principle is a new book by Henry Olsen and Dante J. Scala, "The Four Faces of the Republican Party: The Fight for the 2016 Presidential Nomination." Conversant with the relevant political science scholarship, the authors recognize the importance of money, endorsements, elites, and momentum to victory in the primary process. But according to their "faction theory," to win the party's presidential nomination, a candidate must fashion a message that is embraced by one of the GOP's major divisions and that proves acceptable to a significant proportion of voters in the others.

Contrary to the tendency of political scientists to focus on material incentives and impersonal forces but building on their empirical research, Olsen, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, and Scala, a political science professor at the University of New

Hampshire, showcase the importance of ideas. By delving into state-by-state data from 2000, 2008, and 2012 primary exit polls, they demonstrate the inadequacy of the conventional view that the Republican Party comprises a more moderate establishment and a more conservative group of insurgents. Instead, they identify four “remarkably stable” and “discrete” factions.

“Moderate and liberal Republicans” represent 25 percent to 30 percent of all GOP voters nationwide and constitute the second-largest voting bloc in the party, the authors say. Such voters prefer less religious and less fiscally conservative candidates, and tend to be less religious themselves. A majority of this group believes that abortion should be legal but few regard it as a pressing issue. Nor do they consider illegal immigration a priority, though they are the likeliest of the four GOP factions to support some sort of legal status for undocumented immigrants already here. They admire candidates willing to stand up for their beliefs and they value experience. They are especially strong in the early primary states of New Hampshire, Florida, and Michigan.

“Somewhat conservative Republicans” are the most numerous nationally; they comprise 35 percent-40 percent of the GOP electorate. “They are not very vocal, but they form the bedrock base of the Republican Party,” write the authors, and “they always back the winner.” They are committed to free enterprise but also to reasonable regulation and a decent safety net. They favor limited government while supporting basic features of the welfare state. They embrace traditional values—four in 10 are evangelical—but they do not seek to enforce them through government. They dislike abortion on demand but are reluctant to impose severe restrictions. They reject radical change and rabble-rousing rhetoric, whether coming from the left or the right. Admiring experience and preferring candidates with a Burkean disposition to balance competing principles, these voters are “the sensible median voters of the Republican primary electorate.”

“Very conservative evangelicals” make up about 20 percent of the GOP coalition. They are more likely than members of other Republican blocs to reside in the South and less likely to have a college education. They champion religion and social issues “and see the United States in decline because of its movement away from the faith and moral codes of its past.” They are relatively open to government intervention in the economy. Very conservative evangelicals tend to be passionately pro-life: More than 80 percent of them believe that abortion should be banned in most cases, and almost half would outlaw it entirely. The overwhelming majority want their candidate to share their religious beliefs. Standing up for “true” conservative values is more important to them than it is to any other GOP faction.

“Very conservative secular voters” are the smallest GOP faction; they amount to 5 percent-10 percent of the party. They are most likely among Republican primary voters to graduate from college, earn a high income, and live in a large city. They incline toward “urbane, fiscally oriented” candidates such as Phil Gramm and Steve Forbes who advance sweeping schemes for shrinking government. They typically oppose abortion but do not actively seek to restrict

it. Like very conservative religious voters, very conservative secular voters esteem purity of principle. They also fear decline, but of political principles not of morality, “believ[ing] that the American traditions and way of life enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are eroding quickly and that immediate action is needed to stem the tide and reverse course.”

By furnishing a refined account of the varieties of conservatism within the GOP, Olsen and Scala illuminate the GOP’s tendency to choose center-right nominees—such as George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney—rather than very conservative ones. Only 25 percent to 30 percent of GOP primary voters subscribe to hard-right positions, and the hard right is divided between religious social conservatives and secular limited government conservatives. It also explains Republican instability: All four major GOP factions are minority factions.

Under the authors’ theory, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz face formidable difficulties mixing and matching voters from their party’s four factions. The success of either would say much about the depth and breadth of the Republican electorate’s vexation with politics as usual.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.