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The Five Plausible GOP Candidates

From a Democratic standpoint, a moderate-conservative Republican ticket representing the two largest swing states would be cause for concern.



The prime-time Republican presidential debate in Cleveland, Aug. 6. PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

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After their first presidential debates, it is time for Republicans to get serious. Donald Trump won't be their nominee. Neither will Ben Carson. Nor will any of the men in the 5 p.m. undercard event last week. Despite Carly Fiorina's strong performance, it is hard to believe that the GOP would turn to someone who was fired as Hewlett-Packard's CEO in 2005 after a tenure charitably described as controversial, and whose only run for elective office resulted in a landslide loss in 2010 to Sen. Barbara Boxer in California.

There are only five candidates with a plausible path to the Republican nomination: two sitting senators (Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz), two sitting governors (Scott Walker and John Kasich), and a former

governor (Jeb Bush). They represent a choice among very different persons, but also—and more fundamentally—between competing strategies for the future of the Republican Party.

First, the candidates as individuals. Ted Cruz is running as the tea party's Mr. Conservative—aggressively antigovernment except for national defense, with an explicit appeal to Christian social conservatives. John Kasich is this generation's compassionate conservative, who cites his faith as justification for expanding Medicaid and extending “unconditional love” to gays and lesbians. Scott Walker is the fighting conservative who fires supporters' hopes that he will stick it to the liberals in Washington, as he did to public-sector unions in Wisconsin.

Although Jeb Bush may have been quite conservative by the standards of the 1990s, today he is the voice of the moderate conservative establishment, most comfortable talking about economic growth and opportunity, and about education and immigration as the means to them. And Marco Rubio is running as the future of conservatism—a perfect match of message and messenger.

On the personal front, Mr. Kasich comes across as warm, passionate, almost hectic. Mr. Rubio too is warm—genial, welcoming, a clear and fluent speaker with more self-control than the Ohio governor. Mr. Walker is competent but doesn't seem as forceful as his record, or quite large enough for the higher office he seeks. Mr. Bush is workmanlike, well-versed in the issues but without the ability to present his positions concisely. Mr. Cruz knows what he wants to say, so much so that he often sounds rehearsed, with an ever-present edge of barely suppressed anger.

When it comes to preparation and experience, Republicans will have to choose between candidates who have substantial executive experience and those who don't. The party may well hesitate to nominate an eloquent senator still in his first term—Messrs. Cruz and Rubio fit that description. At a time when Americans are wringing their hands about Washington's dysfunction, candidates who are able to say “I can get it done” and back up their claims with hard evidence will enjoy an advantage over those who can't.

This brings us to the strategic choice Republicans face—whether to focus on broadening the party's appeal or doing a better job of mobilizing its base.

In 2012 Mitt Romney garnered only 47% of the popular vote, even though he received 59% of the white vote—56% of whites with a college degree and 61% of those without one. The problem for Republicans is that the white share of the electorate is falling about two percentage points every four years.

The white-working-class share is falling even faster—about three points each quadrennial cycle. In 1988 whites made up 85% of the

electorate. By 2012, whites were down to 72%, and their share will be even lower—about 70%—in 2016. In 1988 whites without a college degree accounted for 54% of the electorate; in 2012 the percentage had dropped to 36%; the projection for 2016 is 33%. With each election, it becomes harder for Republicans to parlay a base-mobilization strategy into national victory.

The advantage of this strategy is that it requires no shifts of positions that risk intraparty strife. Not so for the alternative of broadening their appeal. Republicans who think that a different tone without substantive changes can do the job are fooling themselves, just as status quo Democrats did in 1988. Mr. Romney got only 27% of the Hispanic vote, 25% of Asian votes and 38% of young adults.

As the Republican National Committee's postmortem report on 2012 argued, winning the White House without endorsing comprehensive immigration reform and adopting a more-welcoming stance toward gays and lesbians would be difficult at best.

That could happen. John Kasich has endorsed a path to legal status for persons who entered the U.S. illegally. So has Jeb Bush. Scott Walker went further as recently as two years ago, advocating a path to citizenship, before reversing himself and opting for a hard-line anti-immigration stance. Marco Rubio pushed for comprehensive immigration reform but then hit a conservative stone wall and backed off.

From a Democratic standpoint, a moderate-conservative Republican ticket representing the two largest swing states would be cause for concern. In fact, Bush-Kasich would be scary, and Kasich-Rubio even more so.