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# The Gingrich Challenge

*A test for Romney, GOP officials, and the former speaker himself.*

Newt Gingrich's sweeping victory in South Carolina throws the GOP Presidential contest into a useful uproar and poses a challenge for Mitt Romney, what's left of the Republican establishment, and not least for Mr. Gingrich himself. We'll see who rises to the occasion.

There's no denying the breadth of the former House speaker's triumph in the Palmetto State. He won among rank-and-file Republicans, tea partiers, men and women, all manner of conservatives, most income groups, and every age group save those under 30 (who went narrowly for Ron Paul over Mr. Gingrich).

Most strikingly, he routed Mr. Romney on what had been the former Massachusetts governor's greatest strength—electability. Some 45% of voters in the exit poll said defeating President Obama was the candidate trait that mattered most, and they went for Mr. Gingrich over Mr. Romney, 51% to 37%.

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This reflects Mr. Gingrich's debate skills but perhaps more his willingness to promote conservative values. Since Reagan, Republicans have had a President or nominee who was typically either tongue-tied or timid in defending their policies and principles. With Mr. Obama preparing a re-election assault on those principles, GOP voters understandably want a tenacious advocate. Voters sense that, whatever his other failings, Mr. Gingrich can match Mr. Obama on the issues and won't go down without a fight.



Reuters

This is in contrast to Mr. Romney, who is cautious at his most tenacious but in the last week has seemed befuddled by questions he surely knew were coming. The demand to release his tax returns was inevitable, especially with Mr. Obama preparing to attack him as "Mr. 1%." Mr. Romney said Sunday he will release his 2010 tax return on Tuesday, but blowing that layup suggests either personal stubbornness or the lack of an adviser who can tell him when he's wrong.

The more serious flaw exposed by the tax debate is Mr. Romney's inability, or unwillingness, to make a larger and persuasive case for free-market economic growth and lower tax rates. Before last week, he seemed to believe he could dodge a class-war battle by not proposing a cut in tax rates. This was always implausible given Mr. Obama's campaign, but it is impossible now that he has disclosed

that his own effective tax rate is 15%.

He faces a fundamental political choice: Duck and cover against the barrage of attacks on his 15% rate, the lower rate on "carried-interest" and any overseas income he might have, or go on offense by standing for something larger than his own career, such as a major tax reform to spur growth.

Mr. Romney and his advisers are making the mistake that John Kerry made against George W. Bush in 2004—believing that voters are so unhappy with the incumbent that all Mr. Romney has to do is present himself as a safe alternative. Mr. Romney seems to think it's enough to run on his biography as a businessman.

It won't be enough—unless the economy goes into another recession, which no one should want in any case. The Republican nominee will have to make a sustained and specific case that Mr. Obama's policies made the recovery weaker than it should have been (stimulus, health care), squandered resources on political boondoggles (Solyndra), and how and why GOP policies will do better. Mr. Romney's 59 economic proposals are fine but forgettable little ideas. He needs a big idea.

In the wake of his victory, Mr. Gingrich has his own challenge because he has always been at his worst when he is on top. The Georgian's main vulnerability isn't his failed marriages, as South Carolina proved. It is his penchant for over-the-top statements and sudden shifts of strategy or policy based on personal whim. In South Carolina, for example, he began to rise when he muted his misguided attacks on Bain Capital and focused on other issues.

Rick Santorum is candidly saying he plans to stay in the race, despite a distant third-place finish, mainly because he thinks Mr. Gingrich will blow himself up again. Mr. Romney and his surrogates will also try to portray the former speaker as unreliable and erratic, a Hindenburg sure to explode if he gets the nomination. If Mr. Gingrich handles the attacks with good humor and rational explanation, he'll reassure voters. If he erupts in anger or unleashes his inner de Gaulle, he'll play into the hands of his competitors.

Mr. Gingrich will also eventually need a more inclusive message than he is now offering. He made a stab at it in his South Carolina victory remarks by mentioning the strengths of his competitors. His bow to Mr. Paul's "sound money" platform was especially shrewd, but then he kept talking and talking in his familiar undisciplined fashion.

Mr. Gingrich's biggest problem is that more voters say they dislike than like him. In a recent Fox News poll, 56% said they had an unfavorable view of him, versus 27% favorable. That's a net unfavorable rating of minus-29%, compared with a plus-5% for Mr. Obama and plus-7% for Mr. Romney.

Mr. Gingrich is never going to be well loved, and voters may overlook that if they want a hard man for hard times. But he can't only practice the politics of contrast and win an election. Media-bashing may work when the questions seem unfair, but not when they are legitimate queries concerning his record at Freddie Mac or in Congress. He needs to practice the politics of addition with independents and nonconservatives.

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As for the GOP establishment, such as it still is, Mr. Gingrich's re-emergence is likely to cause a panic attack. They don't believe he is electable. Our advice would be to relax and let the voters decide. If Mr. Romney can't marshal the wit and nerve to defeat the speaker, then he isn't likely to defeat Mr. Obama.

If GOP office-holders had a better candidate, they should have rallied behind one to get into the race, and they still could if the primary contest drags on without a clear winner. In any case the record of elected GOP politicians in picking nominees is hardly inspiring. Rank-and-file voters are likely to have a clearer sense of

what the country needs. On to Florida.

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