



Who Will Become US President in 2008?

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The American mid-term election campaign has just ended and the 110th Congress has not even been sworn into office yet, but the race for president in 2008 has already shifted into high gear. As of now, some two years before America elects its next president, no fewer than two dozen men (and one woman) from both major political parties say they are running or thinking of running for the top spot.

For the Republicans, Arizona Senator John McCain and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani have signaled that they probably will run. Other leading contenders for the Republican nomination are Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The Republican nominee will be picked at the party convention in Minneapolis-St Paul in early September 2008.

For the Democrats, New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has just won an impressive reelection victory, has a clear head start over other prospective candidates in her party. Illinois Senator Barack Obama says he is also considering a run, possibly positioning himself as the main Democratic alternative to Clinton. Meanwhile, outgoing Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack is definitely in. In all, more than a dozen Democrats have expressed an interest in running. The Democratic nominee will be picked at the party convention in August 2008.

The fact that many lesser-known politicians are considering a run is a sign that the status of the front runners remains uncertain. Indeed, both parties have reservations about their presumptive nominees. For example, McCain and Giuliani face obstacles within the Republican

Party, mainly because they have antagonized social conservatives who comprise the party's base. Clinton, meanwhile, is dogged by concern that she is too polarizing a figure to win the general election. And as a first-term senator, Obama has remarkably little experience as a national officeholder. Thus it remains an open question as to whether any of the current front-runners for major-party nomination will ultimately occupy the Oval Office.

Swinging from Fringe to Center

To enter the White House in January 2009, a successful presidential candidate will need to pass through a two-year, two-stage process in which he/she will be required to: 1) secure the nomination of his/her respective political party by late in the summer of 2008; and then 2) face the American public and win the general election set for November 2008.

Running a successful presidential campaign in a country as exceptionally diverse as the United States is a politically complex endeavor that is fraught with danger at each step along the way. Because America has only two main political parties which together capture the sundry interests of some 300 million citizens, would-be presidents are obliged to perform a balancing act in which they initially must appeal to their more extreme wings (left in the case of Democrats, right in the case of Republicans) in order to secure their party's nomination; and then subsequently demonstrate an

ability to work across party lines by swinging to the political center in order to be 'electable' at the national level.

For example, in order to win the Republican nomination, McCain will need to persuade the social conservative base of his party that he is not as liberal as they think he is. But in the process of reaching out to the right wing, he will try hard not to alienate more moderate Republicans. At the same time, McCain has a maverick streak that appeals to independents and the kind of Democrats who used to vote for President Ronald Reagan; McCain knows that he will need to secure the support of this voting bloc (which in any case is far more liberal than his Republican base) if he hopes to win the general election.

Clinton has formidable problems of her own. Because she is perceived as a staunch liberal by many Republicans, Clinton has been taking more and more centrist positions in order to be 'electable' at the national level. This, however, has opened her to attack from the far left of her own party. For example, former Vice President Al Gore, who once seemed to have been exiled from politics after his defeat by George W Bush in 2000, is emerging as a potential challenger from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

In such a volatile atmosphere, in which the vulnerabilities of the putative front-runners of both parties may cast some doubt on their viability as candidates in the general election, leaders from both parties be-

lieve there is at least a chance that lesser-known candidates could emerge as front-runners. Indeed, although front-runners like Clinton and McCain have built extensive political networks, other candidates may find a counterweight by winning favor with major interest groups that have significant fundraising machinery and get-out-the-vote apparatus.

What follows is a brief overview of the most likely candidates for president in 2008 as of now, some 22 months before the general election.

The Main Republican Contenders

John McCain

Arizona Senator John McCain is a leading Republican contender to become the next American president. McCain is a former prisoner of war of the North Vietnamese who enjoys war-hero status; he has a vast political network that extends across the United States and he commands instant name recognition from Alaska to Vermont.

McCain is arguably also more knowledgeable on domestic and foreign policy than any other potential candidate from either party (except for Hillary Clinton). Although he has often clashed with the White House over issues ranging from campaign finance reform to the treatment of terrorist detainees, he has also been one of the most prominent supporters of victory in Iraq outside the White House.

McCain, who has a reputation for independent thinking, has been

skeptical of the recommendation set forth by the Iraq Study Group (ISG), a bipartisan group of elder statesmen, to involve Syria and Iran in talks over the future of Iraq: "You have to understand that the Iranians and the Syrians do not have common interests with us," McCain said after the ISG released its report. And the ISG's conclusion that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is integral to success in Iraq "seems tenuous at best," he said in a statement later.

McCain's positions on Iraq have earned him the strong support of the neo-conservative advisors to the Bush Administration who favor an active role for US foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere. Indeed, McCain appears to be emerging as the anointed candidate of the White House, and a considerable number of high-level Republicans have already moved from the Bush to the McCain orbit.

But McCain also faces some considerable hurdles in his quest for the presidency, primarily from within his own party. During the presidential campaign in 2000, McCain took some socially liberal positions that alienated his conservative base. Thus although McCain appeals to moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats alike, he has had trouble gaining support for his candidacy from the Republic right wing, which will be essential to gaining the party nomination. According to a recent survey, one in four self-described conservatives, who will play a deciding role in the

nominating process, said they had a negative opinion of McCain.

Another hurdle for McCain could be his age. If elected, McCain, at 72, would be the oldest person ever to become US president.

Rudolph Giuliani

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, 62, is an unusual figure in recent American political history. His coolness after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, and his eloquence about that loss, rendered him that rare mayor who could step onto the national political stage. Indeed, today Giuliani is affectionately known as 'America's Mayor,' and he enjoys a nation-wide reputation as a tough and plain-talking hero of 9/11. In fact, some conservative activists see Giuliani as a Reagan-like figure.

Although Giuliani has not formally announced his candidacy, he recently formed a presidential exploratory committee, which provides the first clue that he might actually run. And recent polling data may be fuelling his presidential ambitions. According to the latest Gallup poll, Giuliani is the top choice for the Republican nomination among Republicans and independents who lean Republican. That poll named him beating McCain by 2 points, 28 percent to 26 percent.

As a potential Republican candidate, Giuliani possesses many advantages. For example, he is a crime fighter and a tax and welfare cutter. He campaigned for Bush in 2000

and he also has tough views on national security. Giuliani supports the USA Patriot Act and has staked out unyielding positions on Iraq. Giuliani said recently that an early withdrawal of American troops from Iraq "would be a terrible mistake." Like McCain, he also disputed the recent findings of the Iraq Study Group that said that untangling the Israeli-Palestinian knot is central to achieving a broader Middle East peace.

Despite all the positive attributes, many Republican insiders do not believe that Giuliani can win the Republican nomination. This is because he is a social liberal while the party is dominated by social conservatives. Indeed, Giuliani holds to a core of socially liberal positions: he supports domestic partnerships for same-sex couples (although not marriage) and as mayor he supported abortion rights.

Giuliani's advisors hope that his hawkish positions on national security will overshadow his liberal social views. In fact, they say he will try to frame some of those positions as libertarian: the government has no business interfering in the bedroom.

But many Republicans are more realistic and thus less optimistic: they know that the Republican Party has grown steadily disenchanted with its liberal members; it was Republican moderates who suffered many losses in the recent mid-term elections.

Mitt Romney

The fact that the Republican field is being dominated at this stage by two candidates who have never been the darlings of the party's conservative base is creating a unique opportunity for a third candidate. This is why Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney is getting so much attention.

Romney, who will leave office in January, is seeking to cast himself as the conservative alternative to McCain among the Republican Party's conservative base. Indeed, some Republican insiders see Romney, who is actively courting social and religious traditionalists, as a candidate who can energize Christian conservatives, stay on message and be a more ideologically reliable Republican standard-bearer. And he already has built strong lists of supporters in early nominating states Iowa, South Carolina, and New Hampshire (in addition to Michigan, where his father was governor) and won notice for charisma.

Nevertheless, other Republicans are asking themselves how Romney could be a true conservative Republican and be elected governor of Massachusetts. In recent speeches outside Massachusetts, Romney has appeared to try to shore up his conservative credentials by distancing himself from his state's liberalism on social policies, including gay marriage.

Another major question for Romney is how his Mormon faith will affect Republican voters' perceptions of him. In a June Bloomberg/Los Angeles Times poll, more than a third

of registered voters said they would not vote for a Mormon for president. (If he formally he joins the race, he would probably make a statement about his Mormon beliefs along the lines of John F Kennedy's 1960 remarks about the primacy of public service over Vatican authority.)

But perhaps Romney's most significant shortcoming is his lack of national security experience. While Bush and his predecessor, Bill Clinton, were governors who also lacked national security experience, they governed in the pre-9/11 era, when a presidential candidate could be more concerned about domestic than foreign policy issues. In this context, Romney has recently made efforts to polish his foreign policy credentials by taking a number of overseas trips to meet with policy makers in Asia and elsewhere.

For the moment, however, Romney hopes he can reconstitute Bush's winning political coalition: he wants to lure evangelical Christians with his support for a gay-marriage ban, and economic conservatives with plans to overhaul health care and the tax system.

Romney is also looking for areas where he can sharpen differences with McCain. One area is in Senate-backed immigration legislation, championed by McCain, which would give undocumented workers a path to US citizenship. Aligning himself with conservative members of the House of Representatives, Romney is stressing tough border

enforcement over a new guest-worker plan.

The Main Democratic Contenders

Hillary Clinton

Senator Hillary Clinton, 59, is one of the most well-known women in America. With nearly total name recognition, the former first lady also has a vast network of supporters developed during President Bill Clinton's two terms in office.

As a result, she also enjoys instant fund-raising clout, and thus continues to lead the field of Democrats with \$14 million cash on hand, after spending \$35.9 million on her successful re-election campaign. (Political analysts are already predicting that the 2008 campaign will be the most expensive in American history, with candidates needing to raise some \$40 million in the first quarter of 2007 alone in order to remain viable.)

On the other hand, Clinton also remains the most polarizing politician among those considering a campaign for president in 2008. Clinton sparks a visceral negative reaction in some voters because of their memories of her aborted effort to reform healthcare during her husband's administration, her implication in some White House scandals, and her image as a calculating centrist on issues such as the Iraq war.

Indeed, some leading Democrats remain concerned that while she might easily be able to win the party nomination by deploying her formidable political team and fundrais-

ing ability, she might not be able to win the general election because of her high negatives.

And some recent polling data seem to confirm such concerns. According to a survey conducted in early December 2006, in a general election match-up, Clinton trails 14 points behind McCain, and even Romney, who is unknown to many voters, runs only 6 points behind Clinton in a two-way race.

The Democratic primary also presents challenges for Clinton. While almost 80 percent of registered Democrats and those who say they usually vote for the party's candidates said they like her, a majority also responded favorably to her closest competitors for the nomination.

Therefore, although Clinton's image has improved perceptibly during her six-year tenure in the Senate, her primary vulnerability (and thus the main threat to her front-runner status) will be perceptions about her 'electability' in November 2008.

Barack Obama

Although Clinton is widely regarded as the candidate to beat if she decides to run for the nomination, concerns about her low favorability ratings among independents and Republicans, a major factor in the general election, have some Democrats looking for an alternative. So the race is on to see who becomes Clinton's top challenger.

Illinois Senator Barack Obama has been generating a great deal of excitement as the potential 'un-Hillary'. Indeed, the freshman senator and former state legislator, who first attracted national attention with an electrifying keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic national convention in Boston, has quickly vaulted toward the top in polls measuring 2008 contenders. He has moved alongside or ahead of former Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, the party's vice presidential candidate in 2004, and other potential challengers trailing behind front-runner Senator Hillary Clinton.

Some of the current 'Obama-mania' is being generated by the publication of his second memoir, titled 'The Audacity of Hope', which has sold more than 350,000 copies. The book has highlighted Obama's appeal as a fresh face on the political scene. And with a black father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, he embodies two racial cultures deeply at odds in American history. Obama has also been opposed to the Iraq war from the beginning, a key contrast with Clinton.

And the excitement around Obama continues to grow. He was the most requested speaker on the 2006 campaign trail, appearing with candidates in more than 30 states. His charismatic stage presence, easy charm and ability to appeal to diverse groups have only added to his mystique. A recent Gallup poll placed him second to Clinton among Democrats and those leaning

Democratic for the nomination, 31 percent to 19 percent.

Thus if Obama does announce his candidacy, he may discourage other Democrats from running or thinking of running.

In any case, the big question is whether American voters believe he has enough political experience to begin a credible run for president after just two years in the Senate. At 45 years old, Obama would be among the youngest candidates in the race. John F Kennedy, who at 43 was the youngest person ever elected president, had three terms in the House of Representatives and eight years in the US Senate before entering the White House. Obama's lack of comparable experience, coupled with no foreign policy or military background, will be a major liability in a field of seasoned senators like Clinton and McCain.

Tom Vilsack

Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack has become the first fully announced Democratic candidate. Vilsack, who was re-elected in 2002 to a second four-year term as governor, says he will not run for a third term, and instead will leave the governor's mansion in January 2007 so that he can focus on running for president.

Vilsack, who was a finalist for the vice presidential slot in 2004, is a centrist Democratic governor in a Republican-leaning state. His agenda has been to balance his budget via spending cuts rather than tax increases, to boost eco-

conomic development, and to focus on education.

A signature issue for Vilsack will be energy security. He plans to focus on conservation, renewable fuels, and using traditional materials in ways that are 'cleaner and greener'. He says energy and conservation can unite the country, bringing together right and left.

His next task will be to raise enough money to mount at least a minimal campaign, in the hopes that he attracts attention as an outsider alternative to the front-runner senators he faces. As a governor, with roots in both Pennsylvania and Iowa and a life story that stresses overcoming adversity, he can tout executive experience that has made other governors successful presidential candidates. But even Vilsack acknowledges that he is a long shot.

Al Gore

Given the lingering uncertainty over Clinton, and the seeming lack of viable alternatives, some Democrats are looking to former Vice President

Al Gore. Indeed, Democratic activists are looking for a candidate who can carry the momentum of the mid-term election victory through to the White House in 2008. Moreover, the possibility of another presidential bid delights many Democrats who are still angry over the disputed 2000 election, in which they argue that a few more votes could have put Gore, not Bush, in the White House.

In many respects, Gore is better positioned for a political comeback than in his previous bids. For example, he has won fame for his production of 'An Inconvenient Truth,' the highest-grossing documentary of 2006. His outspoken environmentalism and opposition to the Iraq war has drawn raves from many Democrats, who have been frustrated by the caution among some party lawmakers on those issues.

Some Democratic strategists believe Gore could be persuaded to enter the race but that he will wait to see how the field shakes out before making a final decision.