

Would Santorum Have Been the Better Candidate?

✘ When Rick Santorum was doing well in the Republican primaries, the common beef against him was that he could never be a viable candidate in the general election because he placed too much emphasis on “social issues.” His tenacious positions on gay marriage, abortion, family values, religion and the like would scare off independent voters. He would be written off as a wacko by everyone outside the GOP right wing.

No matter that he held exactly the correct positions on fiscal responsibility, tax policy, bureaucratic red tape and military preparedness. No matter that he was an articulate foe of Obamacare, while Mitt Romney was dogged by his embarrassing history with Romneycare back in Massachusetts. Romney was the safer candidate.

It is quite possible that a conservative candidate would have prevailed over Romney in the primaries if there hadn't been so many of them. In several states that Romney captured during the early going, the combination of Santorum, Newt Gingrich and, for a brief time, Rick Perry and Michelle Bachmann, out-pollled Mitt. Mitt had the advantage of being the unique figure in the race – moderate and, so it was argued, safe. His support was strong enough to earn him pluralities, but rarely majorities.

I don't think Gingrich was ever likely to win the nomination, because despite his brilliant mind his reputation preceded him. An election with Newt as the candidate would have been all about him and his morals.

But Santorum – had Gingrich dropped out of the race earlier – could have made it a horse race against Mitt.

Ah, but then there would be that problem of his wacky

obsession with social issues.

That line of thinking has turned out to be nonsense. This election campaign has become very much about social issues. We can thank President Obama for that, starting from the moment that he made his public statement in support of gay marriage. Or perhaps we should go back farther, to when he decreed that Catholic institutions must pay to provide free birth control and abortion pills to their employees, in contradiction to their religious beliefs.

The citizens of 32 states have voted on gay marriage, and all of those states have voted in favor of propositions that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. The 32 include hard-core GOP reliables, of course, but they also include such swing states as Colorado, Florida, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin. They even include some states that are normally considered solidly blue and were easily won by Obama in 2008.

Obama may have miscalculated badly here – something he rarely did when he was running four years ago. I suspect that he may have doomed his candidacy by his new emphasis on social issues. When it comes to social issues, the majority of Americans don't seem to be with him. This is not to argue that gay marriage, for example, is either good or bad. What matters in an election is whether the candidate's positions are popular.

If Rick Santorum had won the GOP nomination, he might have been better able to exploit the social issues. Social issues are his thing, he has strong convictions, and what he says rings true and sincere. He would have lit some fires.

Mitt, by contrast, even when he says the right things, always seems a little squishy. And now and then, alas, one can point to times in the past when he said something different about the same issue.

Why Rick Santorum Can't Beat Obama



I have respect for people who want a president who's socially conservative. Many believe it's important that the person who leads our country shares their same belief system of traditional family values. In the world of politics where disingenuous pledges and shameless pandering are second nature, voters are understandably skeptical of politicians and they thirst for candidates they can trust. For many, a

commitment by a candidate to socially conservative principles goes a long way toward building that trust.

The problem in the context of the upcoming election is that if social issues become the focal point of the presidential debate, the Republican candidate will lose. That's the cold hard truth.

Now, I'm not taking a swipe at the merits of social conservatism. I hold some socially conservative viewpoints myself and I believe many of those views resonate with a majority of the country.

The problem is that in today's political landscape, there is no easier cultural battle for the liberal media to exploit, manipulate, and misrepresent than that of socially conservative stances. Unlike economic issues where numbers and equations are used to support arguments based on concise

logic, positions on social issues are often emotionally charged and instinctive. If not articulated carefully and relayed honestly, they can be used to decimate the person defending them. The mere fact that contraception has been part of our national dialogue over the past few weeks is undeniable proof of this.

Just over a month ago, no one in this country was concerned with women losing their right to contraception. That's why ABC News' George Stephanopoulos took so much heat for trying to make it a political issue when he brought up the topic during a Republican presidential debate in January. At the time, Mitt Romney did a good job of squelching George's attempt to create a false narrative for the Democratic party to later run on. However, the spoiled bologna only sat on the shelf another month before it was pulled out of the refrigerator again.

When the Catholic church recently objected to an Obamacare mandate forcing them to pay for and provide free contraception for women, the media and the Democratic party saw another opportunity to inject the manufactured concern of a contraception ban into the news cycle. This time it stuck. What was purely an issue of religious freedom was twisted into the narrative of an attack on women's rights. During a House hearing on the Obamacare mandate, Democratic congresswomen Carolyn Mahoney and Eleanor Holmes received a huge amount of press for denouncing committee members for not inviting female witnesses to speak on the merits of access to contraception. The reality, of course, is that the Catholic church's conflict with the Obamacare mandate had absolutely nothing to do with the *right* to contraception. It had to do with the church paying for and offering contraceptives, which is against their religious beliefs. But if you didn't do your homework and scrutinize the story closely, you wouldn't know that.

Naturally, the media has used the false narrative to pose provocative questions to the Republican presidential candidates. Rick Santorum has been their favorite target due

to his outspoken, socially conservative stances including a personal opposition to contraception. While I admire Santorum's eagerness to speak candidly about such topics, the problem with him defining his candidacy with his faith and conservative commentary is that it paints him into a corner. He allows himself to be pulled too deeply into discussions that are beyond the comfort level of most people. This invites the media-driven suspicion that, if elected, he'll impose his personal religious beliefs on the American electorate. And if those beliefs are in conflict with those held by a significant portion of the country (which in some cases they are), they'll hurt him dramatically in the general election.

Though George W. Bush's detractors often tried to paint the former president as a religious nut, the criticism never really stuck in a way that was harmful to him because Bush was able to stay above the fray. He didn't allow himself to be pulled down into the mud and entertain narratives that haven't been on the political radar for decades. Yet, the base never questioned his conservative credentials. They trusted him to hold their best interests. Santorum doesn't seem to have that same capacity to get his message across without appearing judgmental and uptight. It hurts him... not so much to primary voters but to the general electorate, and I don't see it changing.

Sure, Santorum has made it clear in interviews that he makes a distinction between how he chooses to live his own life and how he would deal with social issues as president. Logically, his argument holds weight. After all, someone can choose not to own a gun but still be a strong supporter of the second amendment. Yet, it won't take a heck of a lot of effort for Super PACs and media commentaries to sway voters away from accepting that distinction. There's just too much Santorum material out there, from his speeches to Catholic groups to his opinions as a FOX News analyst. It's not something he can downplay in the run-up to the general election.

Look at the position Santorum has been in for the past week for evidence of what I'm saying. He's the front-runner in the GOP race but he hasn't been able to effectively promote his ideas on the economy. Why not? He's been busy clarifying his view that contraception harms society, explaining his 2008 speech about the threat of Satan in America, clarifying past comments about the legitimacy of specific Christian denominations, and more. And we're just getting started. Sure, some of these criticisms are based on shifty premises that the media has introduced, but look how quickly and easily they have taken shape and have stolen the headlines.

Santorum often makes the valid point that if Mitt Romney becomes the Republican candidate, the powerful issue of Obamacare could be taken off the table. After all, the administration can point to the deployment of Romneycare in Massachusetts as a template for what they did in introducing the Affordable Care Act. It's a compelling argument. Using that same logic, however, I would suggest that if Santorum is the Republican candidate, the issue of the **economy** could be taken off the table.

There's nothing that the Democratic party and the national media wants more right now than to change the subject off of our economic problems. The one sure-fire way of doing this for the duration of the presidential campaign is to create a culture war over social issues. I've seen them do it here in Colorado, and I know their chomping at the bit to do it nationally.

The sure bet is that if Santorum wins the GOP nomination, he'll be on the defense over his social stances (both real and perceived) all the way until November. And if the Republican candidate is constantly on the defense at a time when President Obama should be on the ropes for his horrific handling of our country's economy, it spells certain defeat for the Republicans in November.

I believe Rick Santorum is a good man with several admirable qualities. Perhaps my strong belief that he's also unelectable is more of a statement on our culture than it is on him. Still, I think we would be foolish to overlook that what helps make him a good man also serves as his Achilles heel.

As Santorum himself has said, the 2012 election can't be about the Republican candidate. I believe he's right.

Why the 2012 Campaign Will Be About Social Issues

✘ With chronically high unemployment, anemic economic growth, and monstrous debt hanging over the head of America, one would assume that the 2012 presidential race would certainly be about the economy. My prediction is that it won't be. Once the Republican primaries are over and a GOP candidate has been selected, the narrative of the campaign will turn to social issues.

Now, before Rick Santorum fans get too excited, let me clarify my point: The debate will not be a contrast between social conservatism and social liberalism. The debate will be over whether or not the Republican candidate's views on social issues are too extreme to qualify him or her for the presidency.

"Too Extreme" will be the phrase we'll hear over and over again from media pundits, campaign spokespeople, and political commercials. It will be the cultural narrative of the election.

You see, Barack Obama has already lost the economic debate.

He's the incumbent president who, despite making hundreds of promises and spending trillions of dollars, has not been able to rejuvenate this stalled economy. A recent Gallup poll showed that only 26% of voters approve of his handling of the economy. Obama's most vigorous defense of his failed economic policies has been to blame the Bush administration for the problems he inherited, and insist that things would have been far worse had he not taken the steps that he did. Other than that, there's not much he can do to escape the perception of gross incompetence, even with the help of his surrogates in the media. Blaming congressional gridlock may keep him afloat in the short term, but I don't believe it to be a viable, long-term strategy.

Obama also won't have an edge when it comes to foreign policy. Yes, Bin Laden was killed on his watch, but with our country having now been engaged in three wars (one more than when Obama took office), voters aren't going to see a much of a difference between the two candidates. Besides, our military involvement overseas is no longer a hot issue for voters. We can thank the media for that. Once George W. Bush left office, the anti-war sediment being shoved down our throats every day on television suddenly came to a screeching halt.

This leaves social issues, and the only chance Obama has of beating his Republican counterpart is to paint that candidate as socially unacceptable, aka "too extreme".

Despite being low on the priority list of voters, issues like gay rights, creationism vs evolution, global warming, and special-circumstance abortions will rise to the forefront and put the Republican candidate on the defensive.

In spite of how bad the economy is, using these issues as part of a campaign strategy could very well win the president a second term. How do I know this? I saw it happen here in Colorado last year.

Colorado is a genuine swing-state. We've given our electoral votes to Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, George W. Bush (twice), and Barack Obama.

When the Tea Party tsunami swept across our country in the 2010 mid-term elections, we were one of the few purple states that managed to withstand the brunt of the wave. While Colorado Republicans picked up House congressional seats, they lost the important U.S. Senate race. The sitting senator, Michael Bennet, had supported the federal stimulus, every bailout on record, and Obamacare – none of which were any more popular here than throughout the rest of the country.

In dissecting the loss of Republican Senatorial candidate Ken Buck, analysts lazily threw him into the category of unelectable Tea Party candidates like Christine O'Donnell and Sharon Angle, who proudly swung the populist banner of limited government but lacked the knowledge, background, and confidence of a serious candidate. This was not the case with Buck. Buck was a Princeton graduate, a former prosecutor for the U.S. Department of Justice, and the District Attorney of Weld County. He never embraced the Tea Party label, despite receiving some support from the movement. He was a strong, articulate candidate. Yet, he lost to his Democratic opponent who had an approval rating of only 39% just prior to the election. How did this happen? Buck's opposition successfully branded him as "too extreme" on social issues.

The Democratic party and outside groups concentrated all their efforts on blasting Buck relentlessly in advertisements and in public appearances for his personal opposition to certain types of birth control, his opposition to abortion in the cases of rape and incest, his belief that homosexuality is a choice, and his skepticism of man-made global warming. He didn't campaign on any of these issues, and they're pretty common positions in socially conservative circles, but the relentless pounding of the "too extreme" narrative caught on and worked.

Social issues often connect with people on an instinctive, emotional level. While more political-savvy people tend to look at comprehensive differences between candidates and their visions, constituents who don't necessarily follow the political spectrum tend to vote more on their gut feeling. So, if a campaign can drive a wedge into the voters' guts by exposing fringe (or at least minority), social viewpoints of the opposing candidate, you can bet they'll do it.

In Buck's case, an election that polls showed was going to be a referendum on Democratic policy-makers became about him being "too extreme". The guy whose policies Colorado voters believed were damaging the country was rewarded with re-election. The guy whose vision they supported lost because of a handful of personal beliefs. Democratic operatives certainly took note of the successful strategy, labeling it "The Colorado Model".

In the 2012 presidential election, there's no doubt in my mind that this model will rise to the national level. That doesn't mean that there's no hope for a socially conservative Republican candidate. The strategy will most likely be used regardless of who the Republican candidate is, but some candidates are certainly more susceptible than others. The media, of course, will play their part by doing everything they can to mainstream the narrative. Despite the horrible economy, Obama's low approval ratings, and the overall unhappiness with the direction of our country, the Republicans need to be prepared for the "Too Extreme" strategy because it could very well lose them the race.