

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.