

The Republicans After St. Paul

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Theme: John McCain has managed to unite the Republicans in St. Paul.

Summary: The Republican Party is best thought of as a coalition rather than a unified ideological force and John McCain has been frequently criticised by members of his own party. However, he has managed to unite the Republicans in St. Paul, not least with the selection of Governor Sarah Palin as vice presidential candidate. Now a difficult road to election lies ahead and the next major events in the campaign will be the debates.

Analysis: From its earliest beginnings in the 1830s, the political party convention is one of the unique features that American politics has given to the world. Generations of Americans remember growing up huddled around radios and televisions listening to the roll call of the states (‘the great state of Illinois, the home of Abraham Lincoln and the great city of Chicago, “hog butcher to the world”, casts all its votes for _____!’) and the ritual incantation of the nominee as ‘the next President of the United States’ followed by wild cheers, noisemakers and a balloon drop.

But few traditions, however venerable, survive unscathed in the Internet age. The major networks have sharply cut back their coverage; Americans who are interested in the conventions at all generally watch them on cable news networks like Fox or CNN. And some of the fun is gone, with a focus on how things will look on television rather than the unpredictable excitement that conventions can generate. Even the roll call is largely a thing of the past.

These days, the conventions settle nothing –a Presidential nominee has not been decided by a convention since 1952– but are great fun for the attendees and a traditional signal for the rest of the country to begin paying attention to the campaign. Still, the conventions persist as a grand political spectacle.

This year, for the first time, the schedule was different: the two conventions followed immediately after each other rather than there being a break between them. This had direct political implications and may even have tipped the scales permanently in favour of Senator McCain, because of the timing of the selection of Governor Sarah Palin as the Republican vice presidential nominee. Because of this extraordinary political year, not least on the Democratic side which featured a serious contest between an African-

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American and a woman who is a controversial figure in her own right, the American people have been paying attention to the election for some time. In short, the conventions crystallised some attitudes towards the candidates –positively for McCain/Palin, somewhat negatively for Senator Obama–.

The Republican Party is best thought of as a coalition rather than a unified ideological force. It was founded by abolitionists opposed to slavery, the remnants of the old Whig Party, and dissident northern Democrats, all uniting to oppose the extension of slavery into the territories in the 1850s (2008 marks the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's famous debates with Stephen Douglas in a contest for US Senator from Illinois which first launched Lincoln as a national leader). These lines of intellectual history continue today in a different form. There is the conservative, often religious conservative, base of the party; there are business-focused moderates, the 'Main Street Republicans' of the North-East and Midwest; and the more libertarian (in European terms, liberal) segments of the party, often from the West. Claims that the 'moderates' are now losing out to the more conservative elements are simply not historical; rather, the sides have been going back and forth in strength for 150 years.

What unites Republicans, then? To some degree, party affiliation is cultural, as with the Democrats. And in recent decades, the conservative movement has become increasingly identified with the Republican Party, particularly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. More traditionally, though, the party comes together to unite around *candidates*, particular leaders who have a broad appeal to the Republican coalition –Lincoln, Grant, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Reagan–. Memories of these successes, a preference for market forces over expanded government and a traditional passion for good government and probity born of Theodore Roosevelt's crusades against big business and corruption in the early 20th century, carry the party along in the meantime, along with the strengths of individual Republican candidates in the states.

Is, then, John McCain such a leader who can truly unite Republicans? This was the undercurrent of the recent GOP convention in St. Paul.

The nomination of Governor Palin for Vice President, on the day after Senator Obama's acceptance speech, came like a thunderbolt and took a great deal of attention away from the Obama campaign. Palin had been mentioned earlier in the process as a possible choice (she is one of three current Republican woman Governors), but few expected it would actually happen. Once it did, the conservative base of the party was electrified, and many local party activists resolved afresh to work hard to elect the ticket –simple things such as walking precincts, participating in phone banks and the like that can make a difference in a close election–.

Secondly, Governor Palin herself came under –and survived brilliantly– a period of intense media scrutiny. The revelation about her daughter's pregnancy surprised the party, but the reaction also surprised many in the media who assumed without evidence that the conservative base would be quick to condemn both her daughter and her (they apparently forgot that Evangelicals know that the saint for whom their convention city is named wrote that 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. Palin's speech on Wednesday night removed any doubt that she could handle the pressure of a national campaign and introduced her to the American people as a witty, intelligent, forceful leader –an independent woman of strong convictions and character–. No wonder Senator McCain, appearing on stage with her after the speech, simply asked, 'Don't you think we

made the right choice for the next Vice President of the United States?’ And the picture of the Palin family, including a son about to deploy to Iraq and her infant child was an American tableau that resonated deeply with the public.

Indeed, the story of the campaign since the convention has been a dramatic shift towards McCain/Palin, in particular among white women and Catholic women, many of whom perhaps supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries. Palin speaks to them culturally, and their struggles as working mothers are hers as well. They bristle at the suggestion that she cannot be a mother and Vice President, and they admire her independence and determination in taking on the ‘old boy networks’, as she has in Alaskan politics.

Is she qualified to be President? Consider this: when Harry Truman, who had been a Senator for 10 years and thus ‘experienced’ by Washington standards, became President in 1945, he said he felt ‘like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen’ on him. Yet he quickly became one of the strongest leaders the West has had, taking tough decisions to found NATO, contain Soviet expansion in Europe and fight a challenging war in Korea. Palin has shown herself in office to be conscientious, decisive, a quick study and a reformer who can unite people around her in pursuit of a cause. She did not reach her 80% approval ratings as Governor by accident.

So the future of the Republican Party is a little more western, a little more libertarian, a little more conservative –and, with luck, more female–. Many undecided voters will eventually choose the Democrats. But the reaction of one moderate Republican woman in her 40s is also typical: I may not agree with her on all issues, she said, but we had to get a woman in the pipeline. Palin’s speech convinced both conservatives *and* moderates of the wisdom of the choice.

The Obama campaign has been a little flummoxed in its reaction. Surely no vice presidential candidate has ever suggested, as Senator Joe Biden recently did, that another candidate (in this case, Hillary) might have been a better choice. The broader campaign thus far has not been marked by excessive negative campaigning, but each side seems to have that prospect in reserve. Small charges and counter-charges dominate each day’s news cycle as the candidates hone in on the few swing states (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Mexico, Colorado, Virginia) that will likely decide the election. My advice to European friends for the next two months is to enjoy the fun if you like but not become too diverted by the daily ‘static’ flying between the campaigns. The major policy positions of each campaign have already been set.

The next major events in the campaign will be the debates. Stylised affairs in which the press hold most of the cards, the debates can form a President; more often, they break a candidacy, as with Nixon in 1960, Ford in 1976 and even to some degree Gore in 2000 (he was seen as too arrogant in contrast to Bush’s appealing humility). Governor Palin’s debate with Senator Biden will be perhaps the last chance for the Democrats to cast doubt on her, but they do so at their peril, with the risk of annoying voters who have formed a favourable impression of Palin and identify with her.

And in government? McCain is a man of his word. If he wins, McCain will push hard on reducing wasteful spending, restoring trust in government (and, by extension, in the Republican Party) and seeking to address health care with his innovative plan that would give families a refundable tax credit to be used to purchase health insurance and adopt a Guaranteed Access Plan run by the states. In foreign policy, a McCain Administration

would advance a strong role for America in the world and refocus attention on the war in Afghanistan while seeking to repair traditional alliances frayed by tensions over Iraq and trade (McCain is an absolutely orthodox free trader). McCain's views on Iraq –in favour of a surge several years ago– have been vindicated by events, to the degree that Iraq is far less of an issue in the campaign than was generally expected. The Russian invasion of Georgia also reminded some voters of the continuing dangers in the world, giving McCain an edge on experience. The need to respond to this point may have tipped the balance in favour of Senator Biden as Obama's running mate rather than choosing a fresher Democrat such as Governors Tim Kaine of Virginia or Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas.

But whether McCain wins or loses, the Republicans face the likelihood of severe losses in Congress. It would not be surprising for the Republicans to lose 20 seats in the House (the first time for either party since the 1950s) and six in the Senate. Despite the Democratic Congress's own unpopularity, the Republican 'brand' remains unpopular, which is why McCain the 'maverick' is very likely the only Republican who stood a chance of winning the Presidency this year. Republicans now hold only one seat in the House of Representatives in the six states of New England; after November, they could hold only two in New York. The party is losing strength along the coasts and among upper income voters (somewhat ironically for the party of business). This has direct implications for what McCain could accomplish as President.

After the traditional honeymoon for a new President (which has become briefer and briefer with each succeeding change of Administration), President McCain would face a Congress that is at best difficult, at worst, hostile. On the other hand, the prospect of a strongly Democratic Congress could help put McCain in office, as many independent voters seem to prefer divided government (the experiment with Republicans in charge of both branches from 2000-06 produced few results, one reason why Republicans lost in 2006). In a close election, it only takes a small percentage of voters to vote tactically in this way to produce such an outcome.

There is, though, one difference in how a McCain Administration would relate to Congress: McCain is frequently criticised by Republicans. Many, particularly those who have clashed with him on government spending or on issues such as climate change (McCain has been a strong proponent of climate change legislation) or immigration (McCain once favoured a broad approach which would have provided a path to citizenship for millions of currently undocumented immigrants) view him with suspicion, and he would enter office with less private goodwill from his own party's Members of Congress than any President in recent memory (even Carter had broad support at first; the clashes with Congress came only later).

This brings to the fore another aspect of McCain's political character, the one that some Republican conservatives fear: the idea that McCain would compromise too much with the Democrats. It all depends on events –surely McCain would start by trying to forge genuine bipartisan compromises before simply doing a deal with the opposition– but McCain would be impatient with the idea that he should simply veto bad bills and be content if little actually becomes law. At 71, he wants to get things done.

More to the point, if, as widely expected, McCain serves only one term as President, Vice President Palin will be in a strong but not insuperable position in 2012 to be the nominee herself. It all depends on how she is viewed in office and whether she would be acceptable to the other groups of the party beyond the Western and socially conservative

wings. Vice Presidents have been challenged in the party before (Nixon in 1960, Bush in 1988), but they usually win. Both Eisenhower and Reagan were popular, and their appeal rubbed off on their VPs. If McCain is unpopular, though, her candidacy will suffer, leading to a long and divisive nomination battle in 2012.

But that is for the future and for after victory. For the next two months, and perhaps for longer, John McCain holds this coalition that is the Republican Party as a trustee. He united Republicans in St. Paul, not least with the selection of Governor Palin, but a difficult road to election lies ahead. In office, McCain would be the nominal head of the party, but a campaign that has chosen 'Country First' for its slogan would not be bound as an Administration to reflect only partisan interests.

Conclusion: McCain is a maverick. He is a loyal Republican but also an independent thinker, his own man, who has carved a distinct role for himself in American politics outside the usual categories. This may prove the secret of his appeal and success.

Our greatest novelist, Mark Twain, wrote in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that the boys said they would rather be outlaws for a year than be President of the United States forever. The next 60 days will determine which of those two will be John McCain's destiny.

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