

2012 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: FIRST THOUGHTS.

As eleições presidenciais 2012 nos Estados Unidos: Reflexões iniciais.

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The American population is choosing its next president on November 6, 2012. From the White House, Barack Obama will be running for reelection. Even without any primaries competitors, due to the north-American election system's particularities Obama is only to be formally confirmed by the Democratic National Convention on September 3-6, if the primaries' schedule remains the same. In this opportunity, they become a forum for the presentation of demands and base mobilization.

Having started this January, the republican primaries cycle has not yet managed to define a candidate. The dispute is polarized between the former Massachusetts governor (2003/2007) Mitt Romney and the former Pennsylvania senator (1995/2007) and deputy (1991/1995) Rick Santorum. Until the closing of this article March the 22, the former Georgia deputy (1979/1999) Newt Gingrich and the Texas deputy (1997-on) and former senator Ron Paul. The prolonged intraparty chocks keep the election in a local level, with debates directed to the republican public and focusing on specific and fragmented topics, related with religion, English as the official language and social rights.

The last great event in the republican campaign will be held August 27-30, with the National Convention. For the White House, the prolonging of the uncertainty is positive as it allows Obama to be in a tactic advantage, suspending direct attacks to the government, which job approval are in the 45-50% rates.

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To positive factors as the job creation, negative ones as the rise in the gas prices, the stay of violence in Syria and the unstable relations with Afghanistan and Iran are opposed. With this context in mind, the objective is to value the route of the republican primaries, the democratic position and present some reflections about November's dispute.

THE REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES

In the years with presidential campaigns, there are two months that are considered “keys”: March and October. The first, March, holds the initial stage of the disputes, when the major parties, republican and democratic, are both involved in the process of primaries, culminating in the national conventions between August and September. During those years in which there are candidates running for reelection, like 2012, the dispute focuses only around the opposite party, with debates concentrated in a local level and restricted to particular agendas. March traditionally came as a watershed in the internal disputes, from the “Super Tuesday” on, date in which many states choose to make their primaries elections aiming to delineate the candidate for the election of November.

October represents the national fight, with intensifications in the campaigns and the realization of the television debates and the “surprise” month: an important occurrence in foreign and domestic politics that has the power to change the rates in the electoral polls, leaving no time for recovery. Furthermore, it is the moment in which candidates focus on the “disputing states”, “battleground states” or “swing states”, once their voting tendencies are not compromised with any particular party, varying along with the presidential cycle. In “blue” states, historically compromised with the Democratic Party, and in “red” states”, that vote for the Republican Party, the bases only have to keep the mobilization and take the voter to the polls (see Table 1).

In the last few years, the polarized north American political situation and the economic crisis changed this dynamic, specially concerning the role of the March month. Decisive before, in the last two presidential elections (and even in the George Bush primaries in 2000), this stage consolidated as a moment when intraparty fissions

and fragmentations in the political and social agenda rose up, prolonging the internal debate. In 2008, the Democratic Party lived this situation with the dispute between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The uncertainties were prolonged until June, with the adversaries sharing accusations intensively, and were only solved by internal agreements, which made Hillary give up her candidature, and ally with Obama in his campaign, along with the former president Bill Clinton, an act that gave her the Secretary of State position. The charisma and renewal blow represented by Obama were opposed to the experience and political integrity represented by Hillary, despite both candidates inexperience in executive posts. Meanwhile, republicans had already chosen its pair with senator John McCain and the former Alaska governor Sarah Palin to represent the critics independent of Washington (the outsiders).

In 2012, the situation is the opposite: after the “Super Tuesday” held on March 6, the candidate in front in the run with the biggest number of conquered delegates during primaries, Mitt Romney, didn’t manage to consolidate his name consensually inside its party. Not only four other candidates remained in the dispute, as Romney principal adversary became Rick Santorum and not Newt Gingrich as initially predicted, given the well-known Gingrich career as a leader of the neoconservative revival. Ron Paul is in the run as an exponent of the libertarian wing, aiming to spread its traditional antigovernment, pro civil society and isolationist in foreign policy agenda (Romney, Gingrich and Santorum would be “internationalists”). Paul is a familiar name in the process, as he ran for president in 1988 for the Libertarian Party and the republican primaries in 2008. The libertarian agenda was present in the middle mandate elections in 2010, with great expansion of the “Tea Party” inside the Republican Party, which took it to victory by then.

Actually, inside this “Tea” agenda, Paul is representing issues connected with an “antigovernment”, while Santorum strongly holds social and political questions with a moral and religious character, replacing Gingrich’s spot. Santorum is specially avoiding discussing subjects related to economics, big lines of foreign policy, recurring to brief and easy critics, focusing in topics as marriage between same sex couples, contraceptive rights, among others.

In an opposite position, Romney rises and defines himself as the moderated republican, capable of defeating Obama because he's able to get closer to the center and undecided voters, not only responding for the neocon religious right wing of the party. Beyond that, Romney would have a "governmental project" regarding economics, politics and foreign affairs. He would be the republican candidate capable of "winning" the "disputing states" that (see Table 1) were mostly conquered by Obama (with the exceptions of Arizona, Missouri and Montana).

Like Paul, Romney had already tried an indication in 2008, giving up his candidature for McCain, aiming to concentrate efforts for 2012. Given the Bush Son administrations history and the deepening of the economic crises, republicans considered the election practically lost to democrats. Notwithstanding, McCain-Palin were able to get a considerable amount of voters, around 47%. These votes did not surpassed the "red states", except the formerly named. Romney is trying to surpass this profile, showing himself as a candidate capable of defeating Obama in November, conquering "battle states". Voting polls that indicate Romney as the best positioned candidate in the dispute against Obama, with 44% of votes against 48% from the actual President, are shown as a proof of his electoral potential. His opponents in primaries, Gingrich, Santorum and Paul, conquered respectively 37,5%, 40% and 39% (the number are an average of the national polls released by CNN and the realclerapolitics.com site).

The base for Romney's arguments are his victories in "disputing states" during primaries. This has contributed for his advantage in favor delegates numbers: 560 against 246 of Santorum, 141 of Gingrich and 66 of Paul (it is needed 1144 delegates for guaranteeing nomination). Even if other candidates got together, Romney would still be ahead. The probability of Gingrich votes getting transferred to Santorum is high, but the ones from Paul do not follow the same pattern, because the libertarian agenda is extended to social themes, considering harmful the governmental interference in the personal or religious individual lives. The table systemizes, till March the 22, the current votes distributions between "blue and red" and the "disputing states" (highlighting the winner in 2008 and the republican winner in primaries).

TABLE 1
THE ELECTORAL DISPUTE

Republican Party ("Red" America, 159)	Democratic Party ("Blue" America, 196)	Battleground States (183)	Winner in Battleground States 2008	Winner Republican Primaries 2012 (Until 22/03/2012)
Utah (6)	Washington (12)	Iowa (6)	Obama	Without official winner due to calculation problems
South Dakota (3)	New York (29)	Colorado (9)	Obama	Santorum
Wyoming (3)	Minnesota (10)	Arizona (11)	McCain	Romney
Alaska (3)	California (55)	Nevada (6)	Obama	Romney
Arkansas (6)	Connecticut (7)	Florida (29)	Obama	Romney
Mississippi (6)	New Jersey (14)	Virginia (13)	Obama	Romney
Alabama (9)	Delaware (3)	New Hampshire (4)	Obama	Romney
West Virginia (5)	Hawaii (4)	Michigan (16)	Obama	Romney
Georgia (16)	Maryland (10)	Ohio (18)	Obama	Romney
Oklahoma (7)	Vermont (3)	Missouri (10)	McCain	17/03/2012 (Results to be announced in June)
Texas (38)	Massachusetts (11)	Wisconsin (10)	Obama	03/04/2012
Tennessee (11)	District of Columbia (3)	Pennsylvania (20)	Obama	24/04/2012
Louisiana (8)	Rhode Island (4)	North Carolina (15)	Obama	08/05/2012
Kansas (6)	Maine (4)	Indiana (11)	Obama	08/05/2012
North Dakota (3)	Illinois (20)	New Mexico (5)	Obama	05/06/2012
Idaho (4)	Oregon (7)	Montana (3)	McCain	05/06/2012

Kentucky (8)	
South Carolina	
Nebraska (5)	

Data: Election Center 2012 CNN. The electoral votes are in parentheses. From 2008 to 2012 there were made redistributions in the total number of voters per state, due to variations in population. These variations took place in all states, democrats, republicans and battleground ones. There were rises in votes for Arizona, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, Texas Utah, Washington; and decreases for Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania.

Total Votes for the Electoral Colleges: 538

Votes Needed for Election: 270

Within this context, what would explain Romney's fragility inside his party, even with numbers showing that his name is the most viable one in national terms? Why the candidate that seems the most "eligible" one for the USA can't do it inside his own party? Aren't the republicans making a tactic mistake by taking time to define Romney's candidature to the presidency?

PROJECTIONS AND INITIAL QUESTIONS

Romney difficulties are a result of intraparty polarizations similar to the ones that affected democrats in 2008, putting in chock traditional wings (the Clintons), with new and emergent powers (Obama). Although they might be defined as "traditionalists" for their influence given Bill Clinton's administration (1993/2000) both Bill and Hillary couldn't consolidate as an hegemony inside the party, allowing Obama's candidature to come up and losing an indication that seemed indisputable in 2007.

The situation is the same in the Republican Party, as Romney doesn't have a solid base, which states a need for an approach with names of the Bush administration as Condolleezza Rice and the Bush family. In the week of March the 20, after Romney's meaningful victory in one of the "blue states", Illinois, both the former Florida governor Jeb Bush, son of the former president George H. Bush and W. Bush announced formal support for his candidature. The importance of this support is in the

fact that Florida is one of the most important “battleground states”, in which Obama’s victory was for a small margin. In Florida, groups of interest well known in the American, Cuban and Jew politics have a great weight, and they have been presenting many critics to the Obama administration, in special the Jew group due to the way democrats have been dealing with the Israeli question and the supposed Iran appease.

The wings connected with the Tea Party, found symbolized in many ways in the Gingrich, Santorum and Paul candidature, are seeking to open space in the party, confronting the traditional that Romney is getting close to. This movement presents two simultaneous forces: leaderships known as Gingrich and Paul between the neoconservatives and the libertarians and the “new politics” wing as Santorum, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, representing this younger and polarized generation in the right wing (remembering that Palin and Huckabee gave up their pre candidatures). The primaries reflect this process of rearrangement.

One may point some sceneries for Romney and his adversaries: in the extreme, Santorum gets to consolidate to the point of emerging as a candidate that would put together more internal consensus than Romney, even with his difficulties to walk in the center. It would be similar to what happened in the Democratic Party in 2008 when Hillary gave up primaries for the benefice of Obama. Santorum would be the candidate, with Gingrich’s and even Romney’s support in this projection. In other sceneries, the most likely ones, Romney would be forced to adhere more and more to the rightist agenda, in particular regarding religious and social themes, to grant his confirmation. This would prejudice his chances in the national disputes in the case he doesn’t get to signalize to the “battleground states” his retreat. In a third scenerie, Santorum, or another politic with a similar profile, would be defined as vice president, repeating the McCain-Palin dynamics: two “independents”, but one moderated (McCain) and one rightist (Palin).

Romney is the candidate with more conditions to put up with Obama due to his candidature’s profile and his political trajectory regarding economic issues, to the biparty conciliation and less approached with religious themes but national projects. Republicans would hardly vote against Romney in the “red state”, once he would be the

“anti-Obama” candidate. Perhaps less mobilization in the bases could be expected, with less voters willing to vote, but it is very unlikely that votes get transferred to Obama. On the other hand, in case a candidate as Santorum consolidates, this would beneficiate republicans in the “red states”, taking more people to the urns. The effect, however, would not be necessarily extended to “battleground states”, in which the tendency is that economy becomes the main issue of the campaign. The international area will arise associated with more latent crisis in the second semester, close to the “October Surprise”. Whichever the focus, the campaign must be propositional, avoiding personal attacks, which would come in favor of the actual president.

For Obama, reelection is viable, but not necessarily granted, specially in front of a candidate that presents similarities with his change speech of, based on the republican efficiency and in the emptiness of the non-accomplished promises. After all, in 2008, the economy, and the hope associated with the renewal of the USA were the reason of the democratic conquer in “battleground states”. In 2012, whoever is the republican candidate facing Obama, he will need to adjust this speech and mobilize his campaign basis, even with the break in the initial enchant with his charisma. Without this “blue” mobilization, the motivation for voting in November is likely to decrease, which affects the victory perception in the “battleground states”.

Groups that voted massively for Obama in 2008, like the youth, hispanics, have to be attracted again, even if basing their speech in the justification that what’s about to come will be worse. In this field, the disenchant is huge. This recovery will depend of new facts to be supported until the election, specially in the job creation, avoiding problems in foreign policy. For both parties, more tactic and strategic conscience is needed if they have in mind the conquer of power, with the candidates for the Senate and the Chamber supporting the choices made in the National Conventions.

Events like the ones of the middle mandate in 2010, when democrats made a big opposition to Obama and, even then, lost for the Tea Party, need to be avoided, regardless of divergent ideological orientations, understanding that the run for the White House is about a dispute between parties and not intraparty. Until March, the polls for the legislative present a technical draw between republicans and democrats that may be



extended to the Presidency. In this hypothesis, nothing is impeding that a “tight” election repeats 2000, with a candidate winning in the popular votes (Al Gore) and another one in the Electoral College (George W. Bush). The run is only in its initial phase, and, at least for now, Obama still has his government as the main adversary.

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RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar um panorama inicial das eleições presidenciais de 2012 nos Estados Unidos, avaliando o processo de primárias do Partido Republicano, hipóteses sobre os possíveis cenários de definição do candidato republicano à Casa Branca e os desafios gerais da reeleição para o Presidente Obama.

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Estados Unidos, Eleições Presidenciais, Política Doméstica

ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to present an initial overview of 2012 US Presidential elections, discussing the Republican Party primary election process, suggesting hypothesis regarding the definition of the Republican candidate to the White House and the general challenges facing President Obama's reelection.

KEYWORDS

United States; Presidential Elections; Domestic Politics