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Cooper: In U.S. politics, ideas come second to money

BY BARRY COOPER

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The Republicans have begun in earnest to choose a candidate whom they hope can defeat President Barack Obama. The procedure is remarkably complex. Colin Robertson, the first advocacy secretary in the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., called it a “spaghetti bowl of competing interests and factions.”

The various bits of spaghetti include elected officials and bureaucrats, lobbyists and think-tanks, mainstream media, along with bloggers and tweeters, party organizations and factions within them, all operating in an atmosphere of partisan intensity. As Newt Gingrich told ABC News, politics in America “has become a really nasty, vicious, negative business and I think it’s disgusting.”

The procedures to select delegates to the party conventions are complex. Even prior to the start of the election year 11 days ago, there were 57 Republican straw polls, all of which were designed to drum up interest in the horse race. Then there are caucuses, starting with Iowa last week, and primaries, starting with New Hampshire last night. There are all kinds of arcane trivia — about how many successful candidates started by winning both Iowa and New Hampshire, for example — surrounding these events, which helps make them entertaining and exciting.

Notwithstanding the hubbub, a few simple, commonsensical generalizations apply as much to this spaghetti bowl as they do, say, to Stephen Harper’s recent victories. The most important requirement for electoral success in constitutional democracies is organizational talent. Ideas rank a distant second.

The last three presidential incumbents, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, all had large, well run organizations behind them. By comparison, their several opponents were a ragtag horde of undisciplined amateurs. In this year’s Republican competition, the consensus is that Mitt Romney has the best organization and the others have lots of ideas. This is why the Obama backroom has had its sights on him for the past six months, at least.

The great advantage of a big, efficient machine is simple: money. Because of the broad American understanding of free speech, they have developed political action committees — PACs — that can raise and spend money on behalf of candidates and

causes. One variety of PAC, dubbed a Super PAC, can raise unlimited funds from all kinds of sources and spend it on anything, including attack ads. Super PACs cannot, however, directly co-ordinate their spending with any specific candidate or party. In Canada, we call this third-party spending, and it is highly regulated.

A Super PAC that unofficially (of course) supports Romney used attack ads against Gingrich and his “baggage,” namely a turbulent personal life and inconsistencies in his policies. Gingrich showed that he meant it when he said American politics was vicious and promptly called Romney a liar, which was then said to confirm Gingrich’s irascibility and instability. Romney’s supporters then did the same thing to Rick Perry by exaggerating his views on Mexican immigration. Goodbye, Rick.

Apart from Gingrich, who has plenty of ideas, the other two also-rans with ideas are Ron Paul and Rick Santorum.

In an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal, the president of the libertarian Cato Institute, Ed Crane, explained that Paul matters because he has such good ideas about taxing and spending. He would repeal parts of the Patriot Act because of his concern with civil liberties. But he also said some intolerant things years ago in newsletters that put him way out of bounds.

Santorum, whose second-place showing in Iowa immediately doubled the size of his war chest, is a working-class conservative Catholic, the kind of person Obama had in mind when he dismissed and dissed those who “hold onto their guns and their Bibles.” Santorum’s principles translate into zero tolerance on abortion and gay marriage.

As with Paul, Santorum’s ideas marginalize him. And yet, he can move audiences with a stump speech that includes a story about the huge hands of his grandfather, a miner, lying in his coffin: “All I could think of was those hands dug freedom for me.” Romney’s equivalent is: “I’ll keep our tax rates competitive.”

If Romney goes up against Obama, it’s Harvard law (class of 1975) against Harvard law (class of 1991). Perhaps that is the root of America’s current problem.

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