

# Tea party pushes big GOP presidential field to right; hopefuls seek separation from each other

*All on the right, GOP hopefuls seek separation*

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Three years and one tea party revolution after the self-described maverick won the GOP presidential nomination\_ but lost the White House \_ conservatives now rule. This week's gathering of the Conservative Political Action Conference, opening Thursday, will underscore the growing clout of the political right.

All but a handful of the potential presidential candidates will speak. Political insiders will closely scrutinize a presidential straw poll of convention-goers.

Less than a year before the first primaries, the jockeying to find a nominee to challenge President Barack Obama is still a crowded, unsettled affair. But one thing's clear: This GOP race will be more conservative, top to bottom, than it has been for years.

The Republican Party has been moving to the right for decades, boosted by massive defections from former Democrats in the South. Now the potent tea party is accelerating the trend, and it's ready for its first role in a presidential race.

Emboldened by big wins in last fall's midterm elections, Republicans see no reason to start the 2012 cycle by softening their calls for lower taxes, fewer regulations, a repeal of last year's health care law and fervent opposition to Obama's agenda. Their unanimity, however, poses a challenge to the numerous Republicans weighing presidential bids: How can they distinguish themselves from one another in a crowded chorus if they're all singing from the same hymnal?

"They're all going to run as conservatives," said Craig Shirley, a longtime adviser to conservative causes.

David Bossie, president of the conservative group Citizens United, happily agrees. "This is unlike previous years when you had moderates hiding as conservatives to win the nomination," he said, singling out McCain, Bob Dole in 1996 and George H.W. Bush in 1988 and 1992.

This time, Bossie said, "they're all virtually identical on the big global issues that conservatives care about. They're all pro-life. They're all for smaller government. They are all for lower taxes. They're all for a strong national security. They're all pro-military."

And there are a lot of them. The lack of a clear front-runner is encouraging more Republicans to test the presidential waters.

The congested field makes it hard for donors and activists to pick early favorites, and easy to stay uncommitted. That further muddies the waters.

At this stage in the 2008 election, polls of Republicans ranked former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani as the early favorite. He was followed by McCain and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

All three had strong links to centrist, moderate politics, even if they played them down during the primary season. McCain had been a Republican "maverick" who backed campaign finance limits and legalization for some illegal immigrants. Giuliani backed abortion rights.

Romney struggled to distance himself from earlier embraces of abortion rights, gay rights and embryonic stem-cell research. Widely expected to run again in 2012, Romney must renew his efforts to explain to voters why he changed his views on issues vital to many conservatives.

But in a sign of the tea party's influence, his biggest challenge may involve a topic that generated only modest debate in the 2008 primary. As governor, Romney overhauled Massachusetts' health care system, requiring residents to obtain insurance or pay fees. Obama cited the law as a partial model for his own plan, and GOP opponents are pounding Romney on the issue. His efforts to placate them will say a lot about how staunchly conservative the party's nominating process has become.

The potential candidate who draws more attention than Romney is Sarah Palin, the former Alaska governor and McCain's 2008 running mate. Her decision to skip this week's conservative conference in Washington suggests the Republican contest may remain murky for months.

Others, of course, can launch presidential campaigns regardless of what she does. But the telegenic former Alaska governor commands so much national attention that as long as she keeps people guessing, the scene may remain frozen.

With major players flirting on the sidelines, "many voters put themselves in a wait-and-see mode," said Kevin Madden, a 2008 aide to Romney.

Invariably, the potential candidates' positions and platforms overlap. Who can make the strongest appeal to Iowa's conservative Christian vote? Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum or former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (who won the 2008 GOP Iowa caucus)? What about the similarities, superficial and substantive, between Palin and tea party champion Michele Bachmann, a congresswoman from Minnesota?

Talk of a "Mormon runoff" between Romney and former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman is mostly in jest. But the two men also are handsome former governors with strong managerial skills, and they could find themselves competing for similar slices of the electorate.

In fact, at least a half-dozen potential candidates are current or former governors, all claiming common-sense, problem-solving skills at the state level.

But none of these politicians has formally launched a campaign, and several have signaled it could be months before they decide. At this stage in the 2008 election, the Democratic players were basically set, and the GOP field was starting to gel.

Nominating a hard-right Republican could complicate the party's bid to deny Obama a second term. Fickle independent voters helped elect Obama and scores of other Democrats in 2008. Then they changed directions in 2010 to fuel big Republican gains. These unaffiliated, often centrist voters will be crucial in 2012.

But conservatives \_ cultural, fiscal and security-focused \_ dominate the GOP primary contests, just as liberals dominate the Democrats' process. In early-voting Iowa and South Carolina, religious conservatives are paramount. In New Hampshire, fiscal and security-conscious conservatives are more prevalent.

The tea party is pushing the GOP further right. Presidential hopefuls know that Republican incumbents in Utah, Alaska and elsewhere lost last year to tea party-backed challengers who accused them of being too tepid in their conservative loyalties.

With 15 to 20 Republicans being talked of as possible presidential material \_ no matter how implausible some might be \_ there's hardly a slice of the conservative spectrum left uncovered.

But how do they separate themselves? Obama used his early opposition to the Iraq war to distinguish himself from Democratic rivals Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards. It's not clear how the current Republican contenders might achieve a similar feat.

And they have some explaining to do, too. If Romney must defend his moderate record as Massachusetts' governor, the other potential candidates have perceived flaws as well.

Huckabee, an evangelical minister who won the 2008 Iowa caucuses partly by organizing churches, is rock solid on cultural conservative issues. But economic conservatives are less enchanted. He cut some taxes as Arkansas governor but also backed sales tax increases for conservation and other programs, and a \$60 million-a-year fuel tax for road construction. His 2000 pardon of a felon who later killed four Seattle-area police officers undercuts his tough-on-crime pitch.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune's otherwise solid record has a big smudge, some conservatives say. He voted for the 2008 Wall Street bailout that has become a symbol of government overreach and big spending, even though a Republican president proposed it and economists say it helped avert an even worse economic slide.

Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty's biggest problem, perhaps, is his backing of tax hikes on corporations and cigarette smokers in his first years in office. He later supported tax cuts. The libertarian-leaning Cato Institute gives him its top rating for conservative governance.

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels' fiscal conservatism also wins praise from the right. But some disliked his backing of a cigarette tax increase, and he proposed a temporary hike in the state's top income tax rate. Conservatives who focus on issues such as abortion and gun rights criticize Daniels for saying the next president "would have to call a truce on the so-called social issues until the economic crisis is resolved."

Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, who is staunchly anti-abortion, irked abortion opponents nonetheless by endorsing Daniels' truce

comment. While he blocked some tax hikes, Barbour enacted a tax increase on hospitals in 2008 and a cigarette tax increase. He oversaw large increases in the state budget before the recession.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich lines up strongly with the political right's positions on social and fiscal issues. But some Republicans see him as a figure from the past, and he is in his third marriage after two divorces.

Palin's biggest question mark among conservatives is whether this polarizing phenomenon, staunchly to the right in the GOP field, could defeat Obama in the general election. A majority of Americans view her negatively, and she has done little to expand her limited but devoted base.

Santorum also is a hero to many on the right. But he badly lost his 2006 Senate re-election bid in the swing state of Pennsylvania, raising doubts about his chances nationwide.

Huntsman, Obama's ambassador to China, is arguably less conservative than the others. For instance, he supported same-sex civil unions. But by emphasizing his record as governor and manager, Huntsman might appeal to pragmatic Republican voters who fear a hard-right nominee cannot unseat Obama.