

Republican campaign hinges less on issues

In a departure from past contests, policy positions are taking a back seat to the candidates' perceived ability to win a general election.

By Paul West, Washington Bureau

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Mitt Romney has a 59-point economic plan. Newt Gingrich promises "very big solutions." But to a large and increasing extent, issues aren't driving the fight for the Republican presidential nomination.

With Iowans about to cast the first votes of 2012, issues have declined in importance as a factor in the campaign, according to a recent national opinion survey of Republicans. Instead, the GOP contest reflects an intensifying search by voters for the candidate they believe has the strongest chance of unseating President Obama next November.

That's a departure from some past elections, when policy positions split the party.

"The striking thing about the Republican race is that there's an incredible amount of unanimity," said Yuval Levin, a domestic policy aide in the George W. Bush White House.

Republicans currently regard Romney and Gingrich as the candidates best able to defeat Obama, according to the latest CNN/Opinion Research survey. Yet each man is picked by fewer than 1 in 4 GOP voters as the candidate that they are most likely to agree with on the issues they care about most.

Even more notably, the salience of issues as a way of sorting through the crowded GOP field has declined sharply over the course of the pre-primary campaign.

In June, Republicans said a candidate's stance on issues was just as important as the

leadership skills and vision a candidate would have as president, according to CNN/Opinion Research. By mid-December, a candidate's stand on issues mattered to barely 1 in 3 voters. In the same poll, twice as many Republicans ranked leadership skills as more important.

That shift reflects, at least in part, the influence of the 13 televised debates, in which the Republican contenders have largely failed to draw meaningful differences over issues or highlight new ideas, even when they have them. Instead of revolving around a galvanizing issue, the GOP race has been shaped by the overall tone of the debates and the perceived authenticity of the candidates as foes to Obama.

The policy discussion in the campaign "is fairly stale: Cut spending. Cut taxes," said Doug Bandow, an analyst with the libertarian [Cato](#) Institute. "I haven't heard that much that is new."

A prominent exception to the lack of a breakthrough policy plank: [Herman Cain's](#) "9-9-9" tax plan. Not a new idea exactly, but a clever repackaging of existing proposals, the plan found favor for a time with conservative voters and activists. But it wasn't enough to keep Cain competitive in the face of allegations of sexual misconduct and doubts about his grasp of policy details. The former businessman and talk-show host dropped out of the running well before Tuesday's Iowa caucuses.

To the extent that policy does matter, social issues, which in past campaigns have animated Republican primary voters, are taking a back seat to the economy. Even in Iowa, where religious conservatives are a potent force, GOP voters say economic issues matter more than social issues by a margin of 5 to 1, according to a recent CBS/New York Times poll.

More than emphasizing issues, the leading contenders have often framed their candidacies as a cultural contrast with Obama, in what [Democrats](#) say are unsubtle attempts to distance the president from ordinary Americans.

The president, according to Romney, wants to shift America to a "European" model of expansive government, with overtones of socialism. The former Massachusetts governor is fond of repeating the erroneous claim that Obama has traveled the world apologizing for America. Gingrich once drew criticism for linking Obama's actions to "Kenyan, anti-colonial behavior," a claim that a White House spokesman described at the time as an attempt to gain favor with the "birther" element of the electorate.

Gingrich has also said that Obama has "a very different vision of what America is," and like Romney, pounds away at the theme of "American exceptionalism" — the notion that the U.S., with a divinely inspired system of government, stands apart from and above the other nations of the world.

The GOP candidates are also pivoting around themes of preserving traditional principles, through frequent references to the Founding Fathers and the 10th Amendment to the

Constitution, which delineates the powers of the states as opposed to those of the federal government. That meshes neatly with the rhetoric of the party's most animated supporters — followers of the [tea party](#) movement.

Foreign policy has provided distinctions between the candidates, but mainly because Texas [Rep. Ron Paul](#) has stood out with his staunch anti-interventionist beliefs. The other leading candidates, to one degree or another, have spoken of the need to rein in [U.S. military](#) activities overseas — though they object to defense cuts — and have emphasized a desire to cut the foreign aid budget.

Reihan Salam, coauthor of the book "Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream," says the remarkable degree of agreement among the candidates "speaks to the homogeneity of the Republican base." It also reflects the strong influence of the tea party movement and its focus on curtailing spending for healthcare and other federal benefit programs.

"Basically, the GOP has been very ideologically homogeneous for over 20 years and the party's core constituencies aren't in great tension with each other," he said.

At the same time, major domestic policy changes may well be on the horizon if a Republican wins the White House. One reason the candidates aren't talking much about them: a fear of alienating primary voters and possibly some of the independents who decide general elections.

Yet some conservative thinkers believe a Republican victory in next fall's election could provide crucial momentum for a push to overhaul [Medicare](#) with vouchers for seniors, and probably higher premiums for wealthier beneficiaries.

Romney has advocated a plan along those lines. But offered an opportunity to discuss it in the most recent debate, he attacked Obama instead, then managed to praise a recent congressional proposal without using the word Medicare or mentioning what his own plan would do.

On another key issue — taxes — changes could be in the offing, according to some conservative policy analysts. The GOP candidates may not admit it, but a Republican president might well sign off on a tax hike, including on the rich, as part of a broader effort to simplify the federal system by reducing costly deductions. A leading Republican conservative, Sen. [Patrick J. Toomey](#) of Pennsylvania, opened the door to increased revenues during this year's budget negotiations.

The Republican candidates, in a signature debate moment, recoiled from a similar idea. They unanimously rejected a hypothetical deficit-slashing deal to trade \$1 in new taxes for \$10 in spending cuts. Unlike the senator, who won't have to face voters until 2016, they're not inclined to publicly buck their party's no-tax-increase doctrine and its tea party activists, at least not before the November election.

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