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## Jon Huntsman's Path to Victory

By NATE SILVER

Longtime readers will know that I was initially very skeptical about Jon M. Huntsman Jr.'s chances of winning the Republican nomination. Mr. Huntsman, in my view, had two fundamental challenges that would be very difficult for any candidate to overcome.

First, Mr. Huntsman faced a significant **strategic challenge**. He chose from the start to run to the left of the Republican field, sometimes quite explicitly critiquing his party on issues like global warming. However, Republican voters are becoming more conservative. Moreover, parties have historically tended to nominate more "extreme" candidates (meaning very conservative or very liberal ones) in their first cycle after losing the White House.

Mr. Huntsman has broken with his party on environmental policy, on civil unions for gay couples and on several key aspects of foreign policy. He also served in the administration of the Democratic president whom Republican voters are hoping to defeat. Certainly, he is not without conservative credentials. His record on abortion and gun control is strong from a conservative's standpoint. The conservative-leaning Cato Institute gave him a very strong grade for his record on taxes in Utah (although a poor grade for his record on spending). And some of Mr. Huntsman's views on foreign policy, if they do not square with the more interventionist policy that dominated Republican thinking during the George W. Bush era, are nevertheless in line with a broader conservative tradition.

Still, as compared to the median Republican primary voter circa 2012, Mr. Huntsman is a relatively moderate Republican and is perceived as such. The vast majority of Mr. Huntsman's fund-raising has come from the moderate wing of the party, including from voters who classify themselves as pro-choice. Perhaps Mr. Huntsman did not help matters, as my colleague Ross Douthat notes, by giving most of his interviews to center- or left-leaning media outlets, nor by sometimes taking a scolding attitude toward the other Republican candidates during debates. But he wasn't going to fool anyone into thinking that he was Rep. Michele Bachmann and would have looked ridiculous by trying.

Then there was Mr. Huntsman's **tactical challenge**. This challenge has a name: Mitt Romney. How was Mr. Huntsman, running at about 2 percent in the polls, going to knock off Mr. Romney, who was running at 20 percent? Especially given that the two have a fair number of biographical and policy similarities, but Mr. Romney has much more

money, much more support from the Republican establishment, much better name recognition among Republican voters and much more campaign experience, having run for president before.

Perhaps Mr. Huntsman had some running room to Mr. Romney's left. But running toward a wing of one's party is a good way to get 15 percent or 20 percent of the vote and no more. Moreover, running to Mr. Romney's left meant that Mr. Huntsman had little chance of competing in Iowa, an electorate that has very few moderates. Perhaps wisely, his campaign has expended almost no resources there.

But by giving up on Iowa, Mr. Huntsman invited two further problems. The first problem is simply that when you don't win Iowa, someone else does. If that someone were Mr. Romney, he would probably become his party's nominee. If it were someone like Rick Perry, that candidate might become the front-runner.

The second and related problem is New Hampshire, where Mr. Romney has something of a home-state advantage and has always significantly outperformed his national numbers. You can't downplay expectations in both Iowa and New Hampshire and expect to have much of a chance (see: Giuliani, Rudolph W.), meaning that Mr. Huntsman must perform well in the state. But even if Mr. Romney were weakened by a poor showing in Iowa, or by other events during the campaign, he'd have a long way to drop before becoming vulnerable in New Hampshire as well.

Thus, Mr. Huntsman's campaign was predicated on something of a long-shot parlay. Mr. Huntsman probably did not have the firepower to overcome Mr. Romney all by himself. Instead, he needed some help from another candidate, someone who weakened Mr. Romney to the point that he could lose New Hampshire. The problem is that he also needed the "helper" candidate to be vulnerable as well, and not have a lock on the nomination.

Consider Mrs. Bachmann. She is capable of beating Mr. Romney in Iowa. But a victory by her there might be chalked up to her regional advantage in the state or to her appeal to evangelicals — perceived as a one-hit wonder along the lines of Mike Huckabee in 2008 or Pat Robertson's second-place showing in 1996. A win by Mrs. Bachmann might thus do little damage to Mr. Romney in New Hampshire or the other states. On the other hand, if a candidate like Tim Pawlenty had won Iowa — someone who had more traditional credentials and more support from the party establishment — he or she might have become the major alternative to Mr. Romney, with Mr. Huntsman playing little role.

The reason why I've become less skeptical about Mr. Huntsman's chances is that he might have found the perfect foil in the current Iowa front-runner, Newt Gingrich. Mr. Gingrich is enough within the Republican mainstream that he can compete directly for some of Mr. Romney's voters, something which by and large did not appear to be true for candidates like Mrs. Bachmann and Herman Cain who had surged previously.

But Mr. Gingrich nevertheless faces a number of fundamental challenges — including, most notably, that the party establishment is extremely reluctant to nominate him. Mr. Gingrich is exactly the sort of candidate who could substantially harm Mr. Romney's campaign without locking up the nomination for himself — and the odds of this will increase the more that Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Romney go after one another.

The best-case scenario for Mr. Huntsman might be if you had a result like this one in Iowa:

- 1. Newt Gingrich — 25 percent**
- 2. Ron Paul — 22 percent**
- 3. Michele Bachmann — 16 percent**
- 4. Rick Perry — 14 percent**
- 5. Mitt Romney — 14 percent**
- 6. Rick Santorum — 9 percent**

These numbers aren't totally arbitrary; they're pretty much what you get if you take the current polling averages in Iowa but subtract a few points from Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Romney (and reallocate them to the other candidates) on the theory that a negative campaign might harm them both. A result like this — a fourth or fifth-place finish — would do a lot of damage to Mr. Romney. On the other hand, while Mr. Gingrich would win, it would be by an underwhelming margin amid high expectations. It would probably not reverse Mr. Gingrich's momentum, but might constrain it to the point that he would not run away with the race. Meanwhile, Mr. Huntsman would not mind that Ron Paul had done relatively well in Iowa, since Mr. Paul also polls relatively well in New Hampshire and could complicate both Mr. Gingrich's and Mr. Romney's paths to victory there.

Even absent this specific scenario, there are other permutations where Mr. Romney loses New Hampshire but the candidate who beats him does not have a lock on the nomination. If either Mr. Gingrich or Mr. Paul were to win New Hampshire, for instance, Mr. Huntsman could claim that he had supplanted Mr. Romney as the safe and electable alternative with a strong second-place (or perhaps even third-place) showing. Keep in mind that supplanting Mr. Romney would not be tantamount to winning the nomination — it's possible that the contest could come down to Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Huntsman, or even Mr. Perry and Mr. Huntsman, and that Mr. Huntsman would lose that fight. But at least he'd be in the ballgame.

But what about Mr. Huntsman's strategic problem — that he is running toward the left flank of a party which is moving toward the right? It remains a huge challenge for his campaign. However, Mr. Huntsman can make the case that even if he is not a down-the-line Tea Party conservative, he is much more reliable than either Mr. Gingrich or Mr. Romney and voters will know what they're getting.

Mr. Huntsman, of course, is making exactly this argument, having released a series of well-produced and hard-hitting commercials that target Mr. Romney for his flip-flopping and that concludes with the motto "consistency matters." Although this message is not

yet resonating much with Republican voters nationally, Mr. Huntsman's polling is respectable in New Hampshire and he is eliciting more sympathy from commentators as diverse as George F. Will and Erick Erickson.

I don't want to make this sound as though it will be easy. Even if Mr. Huntsman's message is a salable one to Republican voters, they don't necessarily like the messenger; instead, Mr. Huntsman's favorability ratings with Republicans are middling to poor. Mr. Huntsman's campaign can protest that he is much less known than the other Republican contenders and therefore has more upside potential, which is true as far as it goes, but his path would be much easier if he had a third of of Chris Christie's charisma — or two-thirds of Mr. Gingrich's debating skills. I don't know whether I'd buy or sell shares in Mr. Huntsman at Intrade, where bettors estimate that he has a 6 percent or 7 percent chance of winning the nomination.

Still, Mr. Huntsman's path is much less obstacle-laden than it was a few months ago. At a minimum, he is dangerous enough to significantly complicate Mr. Romney's life, and Mr. Huntsman has a plausible chance of winning the nomination for himself.