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Policy positions take backseat in Republican campaign Voters just looking for best shot to win, national poll finds

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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 one in four 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 concept 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 United States, 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, co-author 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 influence of the tea party movement and its focus on curtailing spending for health care and other federal benefit programs.

GRAPHIC: Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich sits down for lunch with his wife Callista yesterday at the Farmer's Kitchen in Atlantic, Iowa. Gingrich and Mitt Romney are the candidates seen by Republicans as best equipped to defeat President Obama, a survey discovered. Andrew Burton/Getty Images

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