



# Top ten GOP presidential hopefuls for 2012 (ANALYSIS)

By Des Moines Conservative Examiner, Kevin Hall  
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Palin draws huge crowds in Iowa  
AP Photo/Jim Lee

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The presidential campaign never really stops,

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especially here in Iowa. [The Ames Straw Poll](#) is only 20 months away, and the first-in-the-nation Iowa Caucus looms in just over two years. Candidates are already lining up donors and political action committees in hopes of securing the 2012 Republican nomination. At least six potential candidates already visited Iowa in the past six months. Next year, we will see many more GOP hopefuls putting the Hawkeye State on their travel itinerary.

A victory in Iowa could boost the winner to the GOP nomination. So, as 2009 draws to a close, here is a look ahead at the top ten Republican hopefuls for 2012:

### 1. Sarah Palin

**Strengths:** She is immensely popular with a large portion of the GOP base. Palin possesses huge star power and that "it factor" that connects with average Americans. The more the lefties trash her, the more conservatives want to defend her. Palin's book, "[Going Rogue](#)" is an enormous success. She has effectively used social media, especially [Facebook](#), to put forth her conservative viewpoints on a range of topics. Palin's infamous "death panels" slam of ObamaCare put a serious dent into the president's top domestic agenda.

**Weaknesses:** She resigned as governor of Alaska before completing her first term and failed to give a good explanation. That opens her to numerous attacks. Palin still needs to spend significant time studying policy matters, especially foreign relations. Convincing Newt Gingrich or [Charles Krauthammer](#) to mentor her would be a very wise decision. A large portion of the electorate still considers her unqualified. The "Saturday Night Live" caricature of Palin is how many view the real Palin.

### 2. Mike Huckabee:

**Strengths:** Engaging personality that won over Iowa voters and boosted him to victory in the 2008 Iowa Caucus. A large portion of social conservatives still support Huckabee. Has a national platform thanks to his radio spots and [Fox News Channel program](#). As a staunch opponent of gay marriage, he has a viable platform to rail against it in Iowa, thanks to a court decision making it legal here.

**Weaknesses:** The [Maurice Clemmons clemency](#), along with that of 1,102 other Arkansas criminals. Despite Huckabee's reasoning, he will forever be linked to Clemmons' murder of four Washington police officers. That makes his judgment questionable and an easy target for

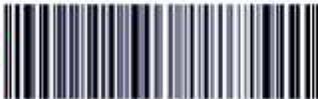
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opponents. If Palin runs, she could cut deeply in Huckabee's social conservative base. Many consider Huckabee a RINO on issues other than abortion and same-sex marriage. Seems to enjoy being a TV star. Has indicated he is "[less than likely](#)" to run if his Fox show continues to do well.

### 3. Mitt Romney

**Strengths:** Financial knowledge. A Harvard MBA and longtime venture capitalist, Romney is the most qualified candidate to turn around a struggling economy. He saved the 2002 Winter Olympics from financial disaster. Already has a base of support and contacts from his 2008 campaign.

**Weaknesses:** ObamaCare. Romney signed a similar, state-run health insurance program into law when he was governor of Massachusetts. The federal plan is unpopular with the majority of Americans, especially Republicans. [Romney's Massachusetts plan included \\$50 co-pays for abortion](#). He used to support both abortion and gay marriage. Portrays himself as socially conservative now, but many consider him a flip-flopper. His support has decreased significantly in the past year.

### 4. Tim Pawlenty

**Strengths:** As Minnesota governor, he balanced a huge budget deficit without raising taxes. Likable personality that won [good reviews for his speech at an Iowa GOP fundraiser](#) in November. Has already begun assembling a campaign team and fundraising in preparation for a run at the nomination.

**Weaknesses:** Used to be an ardent "cap and trade" advocate and signed several nanny-state, environmental regulations into law. Backed away from some of those stances, but his record exists. [Big spender](#), according to the CATO Institute.

### 5. John Thune

**Strengths:** Considered a dark horse candidate right now, but could provide the new blood the GOP desperately needs. Defeated then-Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle for South Dakota seat in 2004. No one had accomplished a similar feat since 1952. Evangelical, who earns strong ratings on social conservative issues, gun rights, immigration enforcement and other typical conservative stances. [Young, rising star in GOP](#).

**Weaknesses:** His plain, Midwestern tone will connect voters, but will not electrify them. Does not have a magnetic personality, nor a high national profile.

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## 6. Newt Gingrich

**Strengths:** Still considered the top "idea man" in the Republican Party. Can speak eloquently, yet plainly, on any issue and school any opponent in a debate.

**Weaknesses:** His support for liberal Dede Scozzafava in the NY-23 congressional race earned the scorn of conservatives nationwide. Persc history of affairs and divorces will turn off some social conservatives. Had a much greater chance of winning the nomination if he ran in 2008.

## 7. Haley Barbour

**Strengths:** As current chairman of the Republican Governor's Association, helped lead his party to victory in Virginia and New Jersey last month. The current governor of Mississippi is a tremendous fundraiser and former RNC chairman. Well-connected to the GOP establishment.

**Weaknesses:** Perhaps too well-connected to the GOP establishment, especially considering the rise of the Tea Party movement. Told Iowa Republicans to resist "purity" and make room for pro-choice Republicans. That turned off many Iowa social conservatives. Thick, southern drawl and Mississippi roots make

him too easy a target for Democrats to paint with the "Republicans are Racist" brush.

## 8. Jim DeMint:

**Strengths:** South Carolina senator has significantly raised his national profile during the fight against ObamaCare. Strong conservative credentials.

**Weaknesses:** The same Southerner stigma as Barbour. Might be considered too right wing by moderates and independents.

## 9. Liz Cheney

**Strengths:** Dick Cheney's daughter has become one of the GOP's strongest voices on foreign policy. She jokingly suggested her famous father might run, but that is highly unlikely. Liz, meanwhile, told the Washington Times in June that she might consider running for office. Smart, articulate and has plenty of political experience behind-the-scenes.

**Weaknesses:** She's Dick Cheney's daughter. Has never held or run for elected office.

## 10. Ron/Rand Paul

**Strengths:** Ron might be too old to run in

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2012, but his son Rand, who holds the same views and is running for senator in Kentucky, could take his spot. Very loyal supporters.

**Weaknesses:** Views are too far out of the mainstream of most Republican voters. [Vocal supporters go too far at times](#) and make Paul look worse. Has no chance to win GOP nomination, but could do some damage as an independent.

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