

For both parties, a vulnerable presidential field

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Three months into the wretchedly early 2008 presidential campaign, a startling truth is already evident. The presidential fields of both parties are strikingly vulnerable. Weak might be too harsh an assessment of these collections of earnest candidates, but both fields have a distinctly unsettled aura.

Start with the Democrats.

Hillary Clinton was supposed to be her party's "inevitable" choice. Turns out, she isn't so inevitable. Despite the Clinton money machine, Bill's potent networking and her carefully crafted Senate record, Hillary Clinton isn't running away with the race. Barack Obama, the first-term Illinois senator, is mounting a very credible challenge. That's all the more remarkable given his nearly blank slate of a record on national and international issues.

So, what's gone wrong for Sen. Clinton? She's proving a stiff at retail politics, witness her on-again, off-again Southern twang and her awkward dodging on the Iraq war. Worse yet, lots of people just don't like her. Her unfavorable rating in the latest USA Today/Gallup Poll is a stunning 52 percent. No one with negative ratings anywhere near that high has ever been elected president. Democrats who worry that she can't win in November are pushed to look for a Democrat who can.

Is that someone Obama? He's a refreshing novelty with a seemingly inspirational message. The chance that he could become the first African-American president may add to his allure for many voters in the Democratic primaries. But Obama also has a paper-thin resume and no known views on many major issues. His sole national experience consists of two years in the U.S. Senate. That would surely prove insufficiently reassuring for millions of voters.

Beyond Clinton and Obama, the Democrats' second- and third-tier candidates are mostly uninspiring.

John Edwards, the rich trial lawyer, is finding that his populist "two-Americas" theme has only limited appeal. Al Gore, the manic messenger of global warming, isn't running. Then there's New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, Sens. Joe Biden and Chris Dodd, and a gaggle of others.

Voters will find few, if any, plausible presidents beneath the Democrats' flawed front-runners.

The real shocker for Democrats, however, is that heading into a presidential election year in which they

should be odds-on favorites to win the White House, Clinton and Obama are still losing in nearly every national poll to either Rudy Giuliani or John McCain.

That must mean that the Republican field, its front-runners in particular, are in better-than-expected shape, right?

Wrong. The GOP field has serious problems, too.

Among the rank-and-file conservatives so influential in Republican primaries, there is palpable unease with the front-running choices; former New York Mayor Giuliani, Arizona Sen. McCain and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

Giuliani is moderate to liberal on social issues, notably including abortion. McCain, a quirky maverick, voted against the Bush tax cuts and has defied his party and President Bush on other issues. Romney can fairly be dubbed a flip-flopper, once pro-choice, now pro-life.

All this leaves many conservative Republicans looking elsewhere for someone in the mold of their patron political saint, Ronald Reagan. It's why former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson has jumped into double digits in Republican preference polls without even becoming a candidate. That wouldn't be happening if the party was sold on Giuliani, McCain or Romney.

For both parties, this race is far more open than it seems.

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