

Mitt Romney's not-so-super Tuesday

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For Mitt Romney and the Republican Party, it was a Not-So-Super Tuesday.

Romney is still likely to win the GOP nomination for president. He has more money and staff than his opponents. The Republican Party has a long history of nominating the guy who was the runner-up last time, as Romney was. As the most qualified and centrist candidate in the field, he has the best chance of winning the general election in November – which should count for something.

However, the primary process has exposed Romney's frailties. When it comes to politics he is, to put it gently, not a natural. He is disliked by much of the Republican base for his indeterminate policy positions. And he is a private equity plutocrat running at a time when American workers are worried about their jobs.

Romney might well make a good president but he is not a good presidential candidate. Super Tuesday provided further evidence of his weaknesses. He won six states and a lot of delegates. Importantly, he squeaked in in Ohio, a state with a storied history in Republican nominating contests.

But this was hardly a decisive national victory. Romney proved weak in the South and with evangelical and working-class voters. He lost Tennessee, Oklahoma and North Dakota to Santorum, and Georgia to Newt Gingrich. And it is rare for a Republican front-runner to come so close to losing Ohio.

All this was despite the fact that he outspent his rivals four to one. We can safely say that Mitt Romney won't be making a cameo appearance on the TV series 'The Closer.'

It is not as if his rivals are superstars, either. Santorum is a second-tier conservative who lost his bid for re-election to the Senate in 2006. Gingrich is an eccentric figure who mucked things up for the Republican Party the last time he held national office. He closed down the US government because President Bill Clinton made him sit at the back of Air Force One. He proposed the establishment of a human colony on the moon and suggested its inhabitants petition for US statehood. The chap carries more baggage than the handlers at Kingsford Smith Airport. Finally, Ron Paul may be a fashion icon, but he will not be president.

Long nominating struggles do not always foretell doom, as we saw in the battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in 2008. But Obama and Clinton were each, in their own way, dream candidates; many Republicans would say that, in 2012, their field is a nightmare.

Furthermore, 2008 was an open presidential race, in which both parties held nominating contests. In 2012, by contrast, Obama is running as the incumbent. He is free to steam right up the middle of the strait like a battleship, while the Republican fast boats dart about in the shallows, firing mainly at each other.

Despite the hysteria of his critics on both the left and right, the odds have favoured Obama's re-election for a long time. American presidents usually get re-elected unless they face a serious primary challenge. Incumbency clothes them in the raiment of national leadership. It also gives them some ability to control events – as we saw with Obama's operation to kill Osama bin Laden, for example, or his plan to rescue the car manufacturers.

Vice President Joe Biden is not known for being brief. But a few months ago he proposed this succinct argument for re-electing the Administration: 'Osama bin Laden is dead; General Motors is alive.'

They are not yet serving boat drinks in the White House: with unemployment still above 8%, Barack Obama is more than capable of losing this election. But those Americans who still own their houses shouldn't bet them on that proposition.

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