

How Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio Can Lose the U.S. Presidency

Huffingtonpost

Associated Press, February 22/2016



The Super Tuesday primaries and caucuses to be held on March 1 are shaping up to be quite intriguing now that the results of contests of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina have left presidential campaign waters muddy.

With 11 Democratic state contests at stake on March 1, Bernie Sanders gets his big chance to trump Hillary Clinton. On the Republican side, if Donald Trump has a super Tuesday in the GOP's 14 state contests, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz may need to form a peace pact quickly. Any delay, and no Republican is likely to reach the Oval Office in 2016--at least, that's the implication of electoral March Madness math.

There is a great deal at stake on March 1 for both parties, although more at stake for the Republicans than for the Democrats. In head-to-head match-ups of Democratic presidential candidates versus Republican frontrunners, predictive polls show Sanders doing as well or better against Republicans than does Hillary Clinton.

Bernie Sanders is up nearly 6 points against Trump, over 4 points against Cruz and about even with Rubio. Hillary Clinton is down nearly 5 points to Rubio, down about one point to Cruz, and up half of Sanders's margin against Trump, Real Clear Politics polling data from this month shows. While the season is early and much can change, it appears that Democrats have fielded two candidates, both of whom can beat Donald Trump.

Republicans have a problem. In head-to-head polling with Clinton or Sanders, Donald Trump presumptively loses the presidential race. He also loses the predictive vote cast by U.S. political history. Lacking the credentials that accompany an election

to high political office (such as Senator, Governor or Vice-President), Trump is unlikely to win late deciders in November.

With Trump, Republicans lose the U.S. Presidency. In losing the Presidency they also lose the U.S. Supreme Court, assuming Mitch McConnell (U.S. Senate Majority Leader) forestalls any vote on Justice Antonin Scalia's replacement until a new U.S. president is sworn in. While the political viability of McConnell's tactic is in doubt, his statement does up the ante. (Indirectly, much of the federal judiciary is at stake in 2016.)

During President Obama's second term Republicans have been fond of portraying Obama's policy-making as imperialistic and self-interested, while they regard themselves as public-spirited and devoted to the common good. The three-way race for the Republican Party's presidential nomination may soon give the lie to the notion of selfless service to the GOP brand of the public good.

After South Carolina, Donald Trump is in the driver's seat. He may well remain there unless Rubio and Cruz decide to play as teammates rather than as adversaries. As unlikely as a pact seems, it would be the type of milestone in party politics that political science theorists might associate with the so-called responsible party model. It would place the party's good above candidate-centered dreams.

Lessons from an Earlier Presidential Race

On March 4, 1909, Republican President Theodore Roosevelt departed the Oval office after 7.5 years, choosing not to run for a third consecutive term lest he mar the two-term precedence established by George Washington. (It was left up to Theodore Roosevelt's nephew, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to upend the precedence in winning a third term in the White House in 1940.)

Endorsing Howard Taft as the next Republican Presidential nominee, Teddy Roosevelt (TR) thought he was leaving the Republican party in good hands. Three years later he came to reconsider his support of Taft, deciding to run for the presidency in 1912 as a progressive Republican. When it became apparent that in spite of popular support he would not win the Republican Party nomination, he left the 1912 Republican convention and with his supporters formed the Progressive Party, effectively splitting the GOP.

TR's new party soon became known as the Bull Moose Party, based upon his declaration that he remained fit as a bull moose. A saloon-keeper and would-be assassin soon tested Roosevelt's assertion, shooting him in the chest on Oct. 14, 1912. Owing to a steel spectacle case and a fifty page folded copy of a scheduled speech in his chest pocket, the bullet lodged in his chest wall and did not penetrate his lung. TR went on to make his ninety-minute speech that evening, declaring that the bullet he had just taken was not enough to kill a Bull Moose.

It was not a bullet that foreclosed the Republican prospect of winning the Oval Office in the 1912 election, but the dividing of the Republican vote. Combined, Theodore Roosevelt and Howard Taft won 50% of the vote cast, Roosevelt getting 27% to Taft's 23%. Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic Party's progressive nominee took 42% of the popular vote, thus winning the U.S. Presidency with the third smallest popular vote percentage ever. (John Adams won with 31% in 1824 in an election decided by the U.S. House of Representatives. Abraham Lincoln won with 40% in 1860, aided by a four party race.)

Coming forward to 2016, if Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz were to agree early to work as running mates, Hillary Clinton might need to make a similar pact with Bernie Sanders to remain competitive. Unfortunately for Democrats, that team might have greater internal tensions than would a Rubio/Cruz team.

The Super Tuesday Verdict

The window for Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio may close fairly quickly after Super Tuesday if Trump wins a clear majority of the GOP contests. Trump wins a divided GOP field. With fifteen additional GOP state primaries by March 22, Trump could own the momentum early enough that neither Cruz nor Rubio could get back into the race.

Super Tuesday on March 1 presents such a wide assortment of states, geographically and ideologically, that Trump's viability as a presidential candidate will be clear. If Trump's March 1 results are strong, Cruz and Rubio better be ready to draw straws, roll dice, draw cards or find some other means of deciding which will be the party's vice-presidential candidate in 2016.

The most reasonable stalemate breaker for Rubio and Cruz would be to put a deal in writing before March 1, witnessed by senior officials in their campaign organizations. Whichever candidate is ahead in delegates after Super Tuesday will stay in the party's race for the presidency. The other candidate immediately withdraws and is named as a vice-presidential running mate by his GOP counterpart.

If Rubio and Cruz have enough self-control and pragmatism to do this, perhaps they have the right stuff to reach the White House. Otherwise, both of them can head back to mowing grass for the U.S. Senate. Or possibly star in a new Donald Trump production called Presidential Apprentice.

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CONVERSATIONS