

//Notas de Análisis//

Primary angst: The GOP's quest for the perfect candidate

**By Professor Maria L. Fornella*

As President Obama's popularity numbers continue to drop, Republicans are still struggling to find the right candidate that can deliver the final blow to the incumbent and sweep the GOP back into the White House. Rick Perry was to be this man just three weeks ago, but after less than stellar performances in the last debates, and once his record had been scrutinized by his challengers and the press, he has fallen out of grace. The Texan governor was perceived as the man that could attract Tea Partiers and base primary voters, while at the same time satisfy deep-pocketed Republican donors with his solid conservative views on the economy and the role of government. However, the GOP establishment and its largest donors are uncomfortable with some of his public statements (for example, referring to Social Security as a Ponzi scheme, voicing his creationist and anti-science views, and his reactionary pro-gun position) which would make him less electable in the national race. Many of these rich donors and Wall Street executives are economic conservatives but quite liberal on social issues.

Paradoxically, Mitt Romney, who is still first in all the polls, has the right mix for Wall Street, but his religious affiliation (Mormon), his lack of charisma and his "plastic" "salesman-like" persona raise questions about whether he can connect with the base and win the primary election.

In this theater of the absurd that have been the candidate debates, Perry did well at first, but then stumbled last week in Florida, when confronted with his own record as governor of Texas. He has been severely criticized by Michelle Bachman for issuing an executive order to vaccinate middle school girls against HPPV in Texas, and in his second debate he was mobbed by his fellow candidates for allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to attend state universities paying the lower "in-state" tuition rate, just like any other Texan legal resident. Even though 70% of the national electorate supports Immigration Reform and the Dream Act (which includes a provision exactly like the one Perry took), and even though the Latino vote will be fundamental in the next election, he was pilloried over it. This is the kind of wedge issue that candidates on the Right can use successfully during the primary but will work against them in the national election.

Perry's confidence seemed shaken for the rest of the debate: he dodged several questions, mumbled responses and looked down at his notes several times. In contrast, Romney, smooth, fresh-faced and articulate, seemed to be having a great time delivering sharp retorts that threw the Texan off balance. From Perry's demeanor one could tell he was unpleasantly surprised by the aggressive questioning of his policies and the mocking tone of his opponent. Clearly, he is a man of authority who is not used to having his decisions and beliefs openly criticized by others. He defended himself as best as he could, but the damage had been done. Consequently, Rick Perry, the GOP's "knight in shining armor" who was urged to run by the GOP establishment and was supposed to deliver the ultimate blow to Obama, lost his appeal overnight and is now struggling to keep his campaign alive.

Aware of this great opportunity to win the White House, the GOP establishment continues second-guessing its own field, looking for perfect contender that can lead them into a new era. Romney, still the *de facto* front-runner, has become a much better candidate in the last four years, but his inner restraint, his lack of emotion, his failure to connect makes Republicans uneasy. He is a technocrat, the type of candidate the voters can't "fall in love with", and while he can take on Obama as an equal, it is not clear whether he can beat him. So the GOP moved ahead in its inexorable quest for the unbeatable candidate, all but destroying former favorites on its way.

The new favorite last week was for a while Chris Christie, the first-term governor of New Jersey and a former state prosecutor. In deep contrast with Mitt Romney the "salesman", Chris Christie, the "Jersey big guy" had a certain quality of authenticity that heightened GOP expectations and made them dream of winning again. Some hefty figures in the party establishment (former statesman Henry Kissinger and conservative intellectual William Kristol among them) were putting enormous pressure on Christie to run. He quickly has become a favorite among conservatives because of his stunning achievements: a Republican governor in a "blue" state who managed to pass budget reform, take on the teachers' unions and reform the state pension system during his first two years in office. He is a big man who speaks bluntly, a terrific governor, a leader at a time when leadership is hard to find. But after ten days of high drama and speculation, Christie announced in a one-hour press conference last Friday that he was *not* running.

There were three main reasons for his refusal to become a candidate for the highest office in the nation: First and foremost, his decision would have come too late. At the time, there were only ninety days until the first caucus in Iowa; Florida has set an earlier-than-expected date for its primary and with that, it has pushed back all other dates in the calendar so that voting may start even earlier than expected. The order of primaries is traditionally set and the privileged states (Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina) would be loath to change it. Governor Christie's campaign would have had to scramble to get his name on the ballot of all 50 states (each state has different procedures, from the very simple to the very complex). Most agreed that he would have been a very strong candidate, but such a late entry may have harmed future prospects for him.

Second, Christie is still an unknown to most of the electorate, and probably would not have had the support of rural and Southern voters. Would the wealthy New Yorkers and party pundits who were promising him huge donations ultimately have delivered and stayed with Christie for the long-term if he lost some of the early caucuses and primaries?

And finally, there was the question of whether he would ignite the primary base once some of his views became known. His record is clear on management of state finances and on standing up to public unions. But there has been scarcely any scrutiny about his views on immigration. Speaking to a Latino group in 2008, he said for example that undocumented immigrants should not be classified as "illegal" since: being in this country without proper documentation was not a crime." He is a moderate on abortion, he has banned drilling for oil off

the coast of New Jersey, and his energy plan resembles Obama. These are all core concerns of the base which has been driven by mainly primordial instincts in the last four years. Would Christie's blunt leadership style and reform zeal, his sincerity about the depth of the challenges and the difficulties of the solutions have carried the day? Now, it seem we will never know, but it is the phenomenon itself that is worth pondering: the establishment is unhappy at the prospects of Perry in the national election, and worried about Romney's chances in the primary. In their quasi-irrational frenzy to find the perfect candidate they may be undermining their own chance to win.

Republicans seem to be looking for the anti-Obama, and Chris Christie fitted the bill: he is a heavy, no nonsense guy (a lot has been said about his overweight condition, with one NBC journalist going as far as asking the question: "Should there be a weight limit for presidential candidates?") who speaks in a very direct way, does not shirk away from difficult decisions, is ready to take on opponents and do whatever is required to get the country's economy back on track. There is nothing Hamlet-like about him, except perhaps in his hesitancy about running for president. He is also a very bright policy wonk who completely "gets" New Jersey problems and knows what needs to be done to "fix" them. On the other hand, although flattered by all the attention and support for his candidacy, his decision was due to a sincere self-appraisal: he is not ready to be President of the United States in 2012, and prefers to wait until 2016 if his aura has not worn out by then.

In the meantime, Obama is trying to persuade Congress to pass his jobs bill and to show that in spite of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles he has faced at every turn of the road, he has the strength to solve at least one problem, unemployment, and the courage to tax those that make over a million a year. His jobs bill includes many Republican ideas. It proposes a combination of shot-term tax cuts, investment incentives and job creation through infrastructure projects, with long-term strategy of tax reform including ending tax loopholes for corporations which would reduce the deficit by raising the government's revenue levels. He still strikes an optimistic note, but he has already recognized that, if the economy doesn't pick up by early next year, he will be running as the underdog. In other words, he has admitted that the solution is really out of his control and in the hands of what John M. Keynes called "animal spirits". Only by restoring confidence will investors start spending the 2 trillion dollars they are allegedly stashing away in wait of better times.

But Obama has now a new challenge: the Occupy Wall Street protest movement that is expanding its base and spreading to other cities. It is the unemployed youth counterpart of the populist Tea Party on the right. Both are angry at Washington, but the reactionary Tea Party blames the government for everything gone wrong, while the radical OWS blames big banks and corporations, or said otherwise, it blames the 1% that have gotten richer even during the Recession, while the 99% got poorer. With its protest movement, the Young Left has declared its independence from the establishment Democratic Party. It is Obama's base delivering Obama himself an ultimatum to either take the side of the 99% or lose their support forever. Since Obama's dreams of bipartisanship are close to over, one hopes his campaign advisors will interpret the OWS

movement as an opportunity to harness their energy towards support for real reform. But it is unclear whether OWS, a diverse, amorphous, leaderless movement, will allow itself to be organized by Washington insiders with clear policy goals.

The GOP frustration must be disheartening. Its establishment saw the enormous potential of Governor Christie to win the center-right of the political spectrum and with it, the national election. His remarkable success at striking bipartisan deal to reform New Jersey's finances proves his *bona fide* credentials as a problem solver and a leader. His irreverent, unscripted yet incisive responses to the press and the public, his indubitable charisma and his authenticity all worked in his favor. However, his refusal to run is now a fact, and as the deadline looms nearer, the GOP will have to reconsider whether to anoint as its candidate Mitt Romney, the Mormon, affable yet one-dimensional former governor of Massachusetts, the most progressive state in the nation, or Rick Perry, the less articulate yet pragmatic and successful governor of Texas, the biggest and most conservative state. Of course, unexpected outcomes are always a possibility, as shown by Herman Cain's case. The African American candidate and former Godfather's Pizza executive who has never held public office, won the "straw" primary poll in Florida last week and saw his popularity soar in national polls after a very well-received debate performance in which he repeated over and over again his simplistic 9-9-9 tax reform program, his plan to privatize pension funds, and his anti-Washington mantra. "Salesmanship", then, is not a bad asset in politics, after all, unless you are also a Mormon millionaire.

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Geography
Director, ODU Model United Nations Program Old Dominion
University, Norfolk, Virginia*