

Bachmann Wins Twice

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 15, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

No one should think that the results of the Ames, Iowa straw poll are necessarily predictive of that state's caucus results: Four years ago, Mitt Romney shelled out tons of money and effort to win the straw poll, which he did, only to lose the caucuses in January. But, something else happened four years ago. Seemingly out of nowhere, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee came in second in the straw poll and it was he who went on to win the Iowa caucus.

This year, Michele Bachmann won the straw poll and, more importantly, she won the day after. She had some competition for the day after contest from Texas Governor Rick Perry, who tried to upstage the Iowa straw poll by announcing his own candidacy the same day in South Carolina. But, while his announcement succeeded in sharing the news cycle during the day on Saturday, Sunday was dominated by the news that Governor Tim Pawlenty was dropping out of the race and by the related coverage of Bachmann's victory. I say "related" because Pawlenty had made a point of attacking Bachmann during last Thursday's debate. The results of that strategy are now in: She won and he lost.

Basking in her victory, Bachmann made the round of the Sunday talk shows. Not many people watch these shows, but news editors and reporters do, and the Sunday shows tend to set the tone for the next week's focus. Excerpts from the shows are replayed on other websites such as Politico and Huffington Post and the Drudge Report. A big mistake on a Sunday show can torpedo a campaign. Most importantly, a commanding performance, or even an able one, can help open the wallets of campaign contributors. There are always two contests going on at any one time: the battle in the polls and the battle for campaign funds. Yesterday, Bachmann gave a commanding performance. Look for the dollars to start rolling in.

The news anchors were tough on Bachmann, asking questions that were difficult if not impossible to answer. On CNN, Candy Crowley asked Bachmann to name some legislative achievement, other than voicing opposition to someone else's proposal. Bachmann had to return to her days as a state legislator in Minnesota, recalling her successful efforts to pass education reform. At first blush, this was a weak response and Bachmann needs to sharpen it. But, there are the makings of a great response here. "In Minnesota, I was able to achieve progress," she might say. "In Washington, it has been impossible to achieve the kind of common sense policy successes I have been fighting for and that is why we need a Republican in the White House." Casting yourself as an outsider is almost always part of the path to presidential victory. On *Face the Nation* on CBS, Bachmann pointed out that for most of her tenure in Congress, Nancy Pelosi was the Speaker of the House, and Pelosi did not sign on to Bachmann's agenda. That, too, will become part of her answer in the future.

When Chris Wallace on Fox tried to pin her down for taking Stimulus funds for her congressional district, she parried the question like a pro, reminding him that she had opposed the Stimulus but that once the money had been voted, it would have been wrong to penalize her constituents by not taking it. Wallace should have followed up with a question about her clinic, which takes federal Medicaid funds, or her mortgage, which was financed by Freddie Mac, but he didn't. Only a sustained set of examples will suffice to paint Bachmann as a hypocrite on the issue of government spending and, already, it may be too late. She has branded herself as

principled on such issues, and the fact that she has availed herself of federal funds may actually make her look more pragmatic.

On ABC, she turned the issue of executive experience on its head. She noted that Ronald Reagan had been a governor, but so had Jimmy Carter. Next question.

On NBC, her previous statements on gays came up and again, her tenacity shone through. David Gregory pressed her on statements she has made about "sexual disorders" and asked if she would, as president, "judge gays." Bachmann replied, "I don't judge them." Gregory persisted: "But, you have judged them." Bachmann simply reiterated her reply: "I don't judge them." She is on message, relentlessly on message, and all without appearing particularly defensive or unnerved. In this regard, she is much better than Sarah Palin who could appear bewildered and then truculent when faced with a tough question.

Of course, a successful campaign requires both a viable candidate and a substantial constituency. Here, the straw poll results confirm that the GOP is in danger of heading off the rails. The two top vote getters, by a large margin, were Bachmann and Congressman Ron Paul. Both were opposed to raising the debt ceiling, which is to say, when faced with the specter of economic calamity, both chose to risk the calamity. The Tea Party may be ideologically driven to such an extreme position, but most Americans are not particularly ideological. They want the economy to do better than it is doing and they do not want ideological orthodoxies getting in the way.

The other key fact to note about the GOP primary constituency is how dominated it is by social conservatives. It has been noted here before, and elsewhere, that the Tea Party may be focused on economic issues, but the overlap with social conservatives is nearly total. This serves a purpose. A candidate like Bachmann knows that her positions on social issues might alienate some voters. She also knows that there are plenty of ways to communicate her stances on social issues inside the social conservative tent. On the national airwaves, she can keep the focus on the economy. Former Sen. Rick Santorum's surprisingly strong showing in the straw poll confirms the fact that social conservatives will dominate the GOP primaries. It is frankly shocking that Santorum came in ahead of both Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich. Whatever one thinks of Gingrich, he was a serious legislator. Santorum's relative strength is based almost exclusively on his willingness to be the most arch among the arch-conservatives on social issues. That Santorum beat Gingrich bodes ill for the prospect that the GOP "establishment" will come to the rescue of the party at the last minute.

Bachmann now holds the title of the un-Romney. With that title comes increased scrutiny. She may make a campaign-ending mistake, but her performance on the talk shows indicated that Bachmann has become a disciplined candidate unlikely to make such a mistake. Don't count her out. Count her in, all in, and I would not bet against her.

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