



INSS Insight No. 313, February 5, 2012

The Race for the White House after the Florida and Nevada Primaries

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The four races within the Republican Party in January 2012 were supposed to have reduced the number of contenders vying for the Republican presidential nomination, and indeed by February, only four are left standing: Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, and Ron Paul. Those placing bets might say that the primaries are over and Mitt Romney is the candidate who will face President Obama in the November 2012 general elections.

Florida, with its more than one and a half million voters and diverse population that better reflects America's multi-ethnic society than Iowa, New Hampshire, or South Carolina, was the big test for the candidates. Romney's decisive victory over Gingrich – 46 percent versus 32 percent – eclipses, if not obviates, Santorum's victory in Iowa and Gingrich's in South Carolina.

Romney beat Gingrich in almost every segment of the population, including among women and Hispanics. Gingrich failed to beat Romney even among the ultra-conservatives where they earned identical rates of support. Romney's victory among Hispanics is interesting because of his prior strong anti-immigration stance, one of the reasons for his loss to McCain in the 2008 primaries. The Florida victory, then, has placed Romney firmly in the lead for the Republican nomination (even the Secret Service acknowledged this by giving him a personal security detail), but it does not secure it for him. Romney will be helped by the easy February schedule. Gingrich, for example, is an outstanding television debater, but no debate is scheduled until February 22, and Romney has not yet committed to appear in it. Moreover, Romney himself is no slouch in political debates: an exit poll in Florida showed that the two televised debates there were a decisive element for more than two-thirds of the voters, and more than 40 percent of these voted for Romney.

The February set of primaries is also to Romney's advantage. In Nevada, which has a high concentration of Mormons, Romney was victorious in the presidential caucuses. On February 7 primaries will be held in Colorado, Minnesota, and Missouri. While Ron Paul,

after having won a mere 7 percent of the Florida vote, has a chance to improve his standing in these states, he is not Romney's real rival. On February 28, primaries will be held in Arizona and in Michigan, where Romney's father served as governor from 1963 to 1969. While younger voters have no memory of the legacy, Romney will nonetheless use the fact to stress his roots in the Great Lakes State.

To win the Republican Party's nomination, the victor will need the support of 1,144 of convention delegates. So far Romney has secured 76, Gingrich 29, Paul 13, and Santorum 10. Clearly none of the four candidates views the results to date as a reason to step down. The money they have raised, whether directly to their election campaigns or to their political action committees, allows them to postpone that decision until after Super Tuesday on March 6, when more delegates can be won than on any other single day on the primary calendar.

In Israel, the subject of campaign financing has merited a lot of reportage because of Sheldon Adelson's \$10 million contribution to a Gingrich PAC called Winning Our Future. The PAC system does not allow donors to funnel money directly into the candidates' coffers, rather to associations that ostensibly dedicate themselves to some general goal and can finance TV commercials with slogans and messages completely identified with particular candidates. In an election campaign that greatly relies on the ability to reach voters through means of mass communications, this is highly significant. Not surprisingly, the PAC supporting Romney is called Restore Our Future. By the end of 2011, this PAC had financed \$18 million of activity, twice the amount spent by the Gingrich PAC.

The question of financing candidates is also interesting in the Jewish context. In the past too, Jewish money played an important role on the American political arena, but there was a cap that prevented American citizens from donating enormous sums. Because of small Jewish percentage of the American population – only 2 percent – there was a limit to how much money controlled by American Jews could influence United States politics. The ruling allowing indirect contributions has to a large extent erased that limit. On the other hand, the ruling has also opened the playing field to anti-Israel elements to do the same.

The Republican television debates, rife with personal attacks, have helped Obama, as do the economic figures that signal at least a partial recovery of the American economy. In late December 2011, the Labor Department published figures showing that unemployment in the US had dropped to 8.5 percent, the lowest it has been in three years. The last quarter of 2011 indicated an annual growth rate of 2.8 percent, an increase over the third quarter data, which indicated a mere 1.8 percent rate. Should the positive trend continue, these figures will make it hard for any Republican candidate to beat the incumbent president.