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Very Conservative Seculars

Abstract: Washington D.C. elites are most familiar with this faction, and as a result tend to overrate their power. In reality, this group comprises a small percentage of Republican primary voters nationwide, and thus never sees its choice emerge from the initial races to contend in later stages. Candidates who represent this faction also have difficulties forming coalitions. Secular moderates and somewhat conservative voters prefer candidates with less materialistic, sweeping economic radicalism while very conservative evangelicals flock to someone singing from their hymnal.

Keywords: conservatism; ideology; presidential elections; presidential primaries; Republican Party

Very Conservative Seculars

The final and smallest Republican tribe is the one that Beltway elites in Washington, DC are most familiar with: very conservative, secular voters. This group comprises about 10 percent nationwide and thus never sees its choice emerge from the initial races to contend in later stages. Jack Kemp and Pete DuPont in 1988; Steve Forbes or Phil Gramm in 1996 (and Forbes again in 2000); Fred Thompson or Mitt Romney in 2008; Herman Cain, Rick Perry, or Newt Gingrich in 2012: each of these candidates showed promise in early polling but foundered in early contests once voters became more familiar with each of them. Secular moderates and somewhat conservative voters preferred candidates with less materialistic, sweeping economic radicalism while very conservative evangelicals went with someone singing from their hymnal. Thus, these voters quickly had to choose which of the remaining candidates to support in subsequent races after their favorite dropped out.

This small but influential bloc likes urbane, fiscally oriented men. For example, in 1988 they preferred Ronald Reagan’s successor to be Kemp, the author of massive tax-cut legislation in Reagan’s first term; or DuPont, an advocate for ending farm subsidies and privatizing Social Security. A quarter-century later, this group was tempted by Perry until his lack of sophistication became painfully obvious in the early debates. It then flirted with Gingrich until his temperamental issues resurfaced in Florida. After that, faced with the choice of Rick Santorum or Mitt Romney, it swung behind Romney en masse.

The latter example is in fact this group’s modus operandi. They invariably see their preferred candidate knocked out early, and they then invariably gravitate toward whoever is backed by the somewhat conservative bloc. Forbes’s early exit from the 2000 race, for example, was crucial to George W. Bush’s ability to win South Carolina against John McCain’s onslaught. In New Hampshire, Bush won only 34 percent of the very conservative vote; Forbes received 23 percent. With Forbes out of the race, however, Bush was able to capture 72 percent of the very conservative vote in South Carolina.

Demographic profile

Very conservative seculars display a distinctive demographic profile within the Republican presidential primary electorate. Compared to other primary voters in 2012, they were more likely to possess a college education. They also were more likely to belong to a higher income