



Friday, August 19, 2011

Don't mess with Texans

BY JOSHUA SPIVAK

With no candidate establishing a strong leadership position in the Republican field, the entrance of Texas Gov. Rick Perry has the party buzzing. A fundraising whiz who managed to beat a sitting U.S. senator in a party primary in 2010, Perry is seen as a formidable contender for the nomination. But the biggest reason for his quick ascendant position in the top tier of Republican candidates may be not his record, but his home state. For over the last half-century, Texas has catapulted itself to the top of the presidential food chain.

Texas has become the nation's great producer of candidates for national office. The state has had a major-party candidate running for either president or vice president in seven of the last 12 presidential elections, and has produced three presidents in that time. In 1988, it had one on both the Democratic and Republican tickets, and in 2000, Dick Cheney had to change his voter registration so the Republican ticket didn't illegally have two Texans on the ballot.

While Texas has long been a critical state in congressional politics — three 20th-century House speakers, including the legendary Sam Rayburn, plus a Senate majority leader and two House majority leaders all came from Texas — its presidential production position only started in 1960. Unsurprisingly, the state has seen a population boom, which took it from sixth-largest state to its current position as second-largest (after California). It also boasts a unique position as a state that is considered part of two separate regions, the South and the West. This would help Perry in a Republican primary, in which the South's Republican leanings give the region outsized influence in the selection process.

Texas' ascension to the position of top presidential candidate producer comes at the expense of two states whose populations have fallen off. From 1868 through 1948, either New York or Ohio had a candidate on the ballot as either president or vice president in all but one election. Frequently there were candidates from each. And in 1944 and 1904, both major-party presidential candidates were New Yorkers, while in 1920, both were from Ohio.

However, since 1948, New York has only produced three losing vice presidential candidates, and one appointed vice president, Nelson Rockefeller, who was promptly replaced on the ballot when the election came around. Ohio has been completely shut out since 1944. Nobody is looking to New York or Ohio for a presidential contender this time.

Of course, it is not just population that makes Perry a formidable contender. He had the good fortune to have led one of the few states to perform decently in the recession. He is also able to take advantage of a unique governmental system. Despite its size, Texas has one of the least powerful governors in the country. The position is constrained by numerous other statewide elected offices and by a powerful lieutenant governor. Thanks to these limits, and thanks to a limitation on any government action in Texas — the state legislature meets only every other year — there is only a small amount of policy that can be blamed on any state-level Texas official. In a year when the Republican base seems particularly in favor of limited government, to the degree that there are almost no sitting officials running for the presidency, this can be a big selling point.

As the Republican presidential field is still unsettled, Rick Perry has a chance to establish a very strong position. His record and his fundraising will help. But just the fact that he is from the new presidential incubator state of Texas should prove its own reward in this race.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He blogs at The Recall Elections Blog.