

RELEASE IN FULL

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## How Romney Could Win

By BILL KELLER

Election Day is nearly a year off and the first primaries aren't until January, but I'm ready to skip ahead to the main event. The last serious hope of the Tea Partiers, Rick Perry, and their last not-so-serious hope, Herman Cain, are in campaign death spirals. Unless God has a cruel sense of humor, Newt Gingrich will pass like a tantrum. That leaves us with a general election between two serious and certifiably sane candidates. Phew!!

If you want to go into hibernation now and re-emerge in August for the campaign home stretch, I understand. But just to put the season of vaudeville firmly behind us, let's contemplate the choice that awaits: two confident, intelligible, no-drama, rather distant men, each of whom seems to have overcompensated for bigot-arousing origins (Obama's race, Romney's religion) by being rational to a fault.

Despite efforts to polarize our politics into ideological base camps, in presidential elections the deciding vote still belongs to the middle. These voters have been drowned out lately by the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, but they are the main prize in 2012. Bruce Gyory, who is a consultant and teaches voting trends at the State University of New York at Albany, calls them the "40 within 40" — 40 percent of the electorate self-identify as independent, and 40 percent of those independents describe themselves as moderate. That means about one in six voters are up for grabs. Obama won them in 2008. The Democrats lost them badly in 2010.

We cannot know whose advertising arsenal will be most effective, which candidate will excel in the debates, or what blunders might tilt the outcome. We don't know whether the MoveOn left or the evangelical right will simply stay home. We don't know if Ron Paul will siphon off some of his libertarian devout into a third-party run. But we can, even at this distance, imagine the arguments that will be made to win over those decisive swing voters for Romney. Here are four.

**THE NOT-OBAMA CASE** Just as a series of Republican improbables competed for the role of Not-Mitt, Romney is now Not-Obama, an alternative vessel not only for those who have loathed Obama all along but for the disenchanted Obama voters of 2008. I've argued elsewhere that the disappointments of Obama's first term are exaggerated and only in part his fault. But the sense of frustration is real. To be sure, Romney is not going to get voters who are upset that Obama failed to be Dennis Kucinich, but he will surely pursue those less ideological voters who invested hope in Obama, who still want him to succeed, but who are starting to believe what will be Romney's main message: Obama is a nice guy, but in over his head.

O.K., Romney is not Obama, but who the heck is he? He may have been, as he stressed last week, an unwavering Mormon all his life, but on the issues he's been born-again, again and again. His reincarnations on social issues, the environment, taxes and health care, combined with an oleaginous affect, present Romney with a serious authenticity problem.

Still, that decisive middle is in a sullen mood. In the elections of 2006, 2008 and 2010, Gyory notes, "Their vote has been swung as if it were Thor's hammer against incumbents." If Obama can't convincingly offer moderate voters a better direction for the country, they will cast their lot with change, even if it is not change they entirely believe in.

**THE C.E.O.-PRESIDENT CASE** The disgust with government is so pervasive that private-sector credentials have particular appeal. At the Bain management consulting and equity investment companies, Romney made a reputation as a problem-fixer, an aura enhanced by his role in cleaning up the scandal-plagued Salt Lake City Olympics and his penchant for 59-point job plans.

But Romney's role in the private sector was as a ruthless efficiency machine, a downsizer and outsourcer — in short, his critics say, a job-killer. When Romney challenged Ted Kennedy for the Senate in 1994, the Democratic campaign guru Robert Shrum prepared ads featuring the misery of workers streamlined out of jobs by Bain Capital. Watch for the sequel in 2012.

Romney can counter, with justification, that making companies more efficient assures their survival and long-term growth. But as an empathetic message, it's just a notch more winning than "Let them eat cake."

**THE TAMING-CONGRESS CASE** Those swing voters, polls suggest, want pretty much what Obama wants: short-term stimulus (middle-class tax relief, infrastructure investments, money to keep teachers and cops on the job) and long-term discipline (including some new tax revenue). But Obama has had little success budging the mulish intransigents on Capitol Hill.

Jonathan Chait, no apologist for the Republicans, argued recently that the best way to break the impasse might be to elect Romney. If Romney went to Capitol Hill with some version of the grand bargain, Chait wrote, most Republicans "would see the need to rescue the economy under a fellow Republican's presidency, and sheer political expediency would trump all." Romney constantly points that as governor he worked across party lines to balance the budget. (He does not point out that he did it in part by raising taxes and fees.)

The Democrats will retort that the Republican Party is hostage to its dogmatically antigovernment Tea Party minority, and Romney is, too. Remember that chillingly defining moment when the Republican candidates were asked if they would reject a deal that included \$10 of spending cuts for just \$1 in tax hikes? Romney's hand was raised with the rest of them. Swing voters would have taken the 10-to-1 deal in a heartbeat.

So Democrats will paint Romney as a rubber stamp for Congressional Republicans who want to coddle the rich, fix the economy on the backs of the middle class and seniors, and let Wall Street and the polluters write their own rules. Mindful of the polls showing the popularity of that Congress at about 9 percent, they will try to make Romney and Eric Cantor seem like running mates.

I think Romney will not be easy to tar with the zealot brush, though, precisely because he's so lacking in passion. "Mitt is hard to love," says a Republican who has worked for him. "But for the same reasons, he's hard to hate."

**THE NOT-THAT-CONSERVATIVE CASE** Moderate swing voters would have been more in tune with the old blue-state Romney who — as The Washington Post recalled the other day — once courted activists for gay rights, abortion and environmental protection, promising to be their GOP BFF in Washington. Romney's camp is counting on those issues to be dwarfed by economic concerns, but moderates may be queasy about the new Romney, who declares he would "absolutely" support a law saying that human life begins at conception, who has pledged to support federal laws against same-sex marriage, and whose environmental platform sounds like Sarah Palin's.

The old Romney is not going to reemerge, but a moderate might console himself that Romney is unlikely to spend a lot of energy on rolling back the tide of civil rights. That's not what he cares about. Anyway, these issues are being decided mostly in the states and the courts. Put another way, if the far right hates Romney, how bad can he be?

But, as Peter Beinart pointed out recently, President Romney would inherit a permanent conservative infrastructure of think tanks, lobbyists and members of Congress that constrains any Republican administration. "It doesn't matter all that much what Romney really believes, or whether he believes much of anything," Beinart observed. "Romney will be a very conservative president because that's the only kind of president a Republican can be these days."

To which I would add just two words: Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, if you find yourself hungering for the days when politics had heart, buy Bill Clinton's new book. You may find, as I did, that you kind of miss him.