

## ***Handicapping 2012***

***By Mel Lavine***

*Special to the Times*

The New York Times ran a piece in its Sunday magazine on November 3 pointing out that Jon Huntsman is the one Republican candidate who stands the best chance to beat Barack Obama a year from now.

Hunstman's time in the limelight has been almost below the threshold of consciousness. But a key factor in his favor is that he is a moderate, not a fanatic on either the right or the left. Conventional wisdom this time around is that presidential candidates perceived as too liberal or too conservative will not fare well in next year's election cycle.

A two-time Republican governor of Utah, Huntsman won re-election with more Democratic and independent voters than his Democratic opponent. He's also served in high posts in the administrations of both parties. He was Obama's ambassador to China.

The Times article is by Nate Silver, who runs a blog called FiveThirtyEight and is writing a book about forecasting and prediction. He placed the 2012 contest on a scale pegged to Obama's performance in general, and the president's economic performance, and, of particular importance, "the ideological positioning of the Republican candidates and that of past opposition-party nominees ... and other indicators like Congressional voting records and surveys of presidential historians."

The historical approach sometimes falls flat. In 1944 and 1948, Thomas Dewey, a moderate, lost both times. In 1980, the very conservative Ronald Reagan "won ... because voters could find few positives in Jimmy Carter's record."

But Silver says the theory holds up in the majority of cases. "When the incumbent party faced an opposition candidate with an extremism rating of 50 or higher, it won re-election in six out of eight cases. When it faced one with a rating of 50 or lower, meaning a more moderate nominee, it won just three times out of nine."

Thus he handicaps the current crop: Huntsman 40; Mitt Romney 49; Herman Cain, 60; Gary Johnson, 63; Rick Santorum, 64; Rick Perry, 67; Newt Gingrich, 68; Michele Bachmann, 83; Ron Paul, 96.

“As you can see,” Silver says, “Romney’s score of 49 is to the left of every Republican candidate except for Huntsman. But the G.O.P. as a whole has moved to the right, so Romney is about average in the broader scope of history.” In recent polls against Romney, Obama’s lead is 1 percentage point – but he leads Herman Cain by 8, Rick Perry by 11 and Michele Bachmann by 14, according to Silver.

As for Huntsman, in last Saturday’s debate he and Representative Ron Paul were the only Republicans on the stage to denounce waterboarding as torture. Huntsman, who is in agreement with Obama on this issue, declared, “We diminish our standing in the world and the values that we project, which include liberty, democracy, human rights and open markets, when we torture. We should not torture. Waterboarding is torture.”

Huntsman spoke with a recognition of history. But Democrats need not panic. The last I looked Huntsman’s numbers in the race for his party’s nomination were still in single digits.

*Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: [mellavine@aol.com](mailto:mellavine@aol.com).*

