

Running His Own Race

by Ryan Sager

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Mayor Giuliani is hoping that New York can be the new New Hampshire — along with California, Connecticut, Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, and a host of other states getting ready to hold their primaries in early February or even late January.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, there's reason to believe he can get his wish.

No doubt, Mr. Giuliani has had a tough couple of months, between missteps on abortion and increasing scrutiny of his business and personal life. But that only makes it all the more remarkable that Mr. Giuliani continues to hold a nearly 10-point lead nationally over his nearest rival, Senator McCain of Arizona. Behind Mr. McCain (though not by much) is a former senator and fictional district attorney, Fred Thompson — who, of course, isn't yet in the race. And behind Mr. Thompson is the former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney.

In fact, it's almost as if there are two races on the Republican side: McCain v. Romney v. the specter of Thompson, and Giuliani v. himself. While Mr. Giuliani is still competitive in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina — the traditional early three states — any or all of these could easily go to his rivals. Nationally, though, he's competing only against himself and the possibility of self-destruction.

Sensing that things were moving in a self-destructive direction after the California debate where Mr. Giuliani gave lackluster answers on abortion, the Giuliani campaign has begun making noises that, while it is in no way abandoning the traditional early three, the campaign's real strength will show through on February 5, the day California, New Jersey, and New York (along with maybe 20 other states) will hold their primaries.

It's been called Super Duper Tuesday. It's been called the Powerball Primary. For Mr. Giuliani, it could end up being Christmas come early.

His strength in the February 5 states, where social issues hold less sway with primary voters, is quite formidable. In his home state, Mr. Giuliani enjoys a 30-point lead. The latest Field Poll out of California puts Mr. Giuliani up 8 points over Mr. McCain. The latest Strategic Vision poll out of New Jersey puts Mr. Giuliani up an astounding 34 points. In Texas, he's up 5; in Pennsylvania, he's up 12; in Florida, which may move its primary into January and before South Carolina, he's up 13.

The \$64,000 question is whether — should he lose one or more of the early states — Mr. Giuliani's February 5 strategy can see him through.

Despite the fact that we've never seen anything like this February 5 super-primary, a conventional wisdom has formed: It actually makes Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina more important.

But there's no reason this should necessarily be so.

An expert in presidential primary elections at Georgetown University, Christopher Hull, puts it this way: "If the front-runner wins in the early states, then the front-runner is going to win the nomination. ... If an insurgent wins in the early states, the coin will be in the air."

One might also add that if the early states render a split decision, the coin will be in the air then, as well. And the national front-runner, Mr. Giuliani, will be at a tremendous advantage.

Ultimately, however, the entire enterprise hangs on the observer effect. If the press and primary voters see losses for Mr. Giuliani in early primary states as a sign that he's done for, that will be the story, and it will cost him money and votes, ultimately destroying him on February 5. On the other hand, if observers keep their eyes on the broader picture, they'll likely see his campaign as still going strong and worthy of support.

The press, so far, is stuck in the mode of treating Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina as the be all and end all of the 2008 primary season — despite the fact that the landscape has shifted dramatically. But there's no reason such places should dictate to the rest of us.

What's more, Republican primary voters, who ought to worry about how their candidate will do in states such as California, Florida, New Jersey, Missouri, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania come the general election, might want to rethink the old ways as well.

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