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# Taking Republicans' Presidential Pulse at a Political Reality Show

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During the more than three decades of my misbegotten adolescence covering presidential politics, I have grown exasperated with the ersatz measures of candidate popularity and momentum that fill the news void until the primaries. Before you object — no, this is not a premature lament.



Mark Wilson, Getty Images

Less than two weeks ago, the press waited eagerly for the results of a self-selected 2012 straw poll at the self-selected Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington before seeing their GOP trend stories deflated when Ron Paul won. The Gallup Poll in early February measured national Republican sentiment, and found that Mitt Romney defeated Sarah Palin by the dramatic margin of 14 percent to 11 percent. As Romney begins his national book tour this week, you can be certain that intrepid political reporters will measure his crowds against the throngs that had greeted Palin, his fellow GOP competitor for a National Book Award.

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A beguiling fantasy for those of us who have wasted the best years of our lives on press buses is somehow to make the process of picking a president more equitable. The goal is not to dictate an outcome, but rather to give serious politicians without national name recognition, like, say, Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels of Indiana, a fair shot to make their case on a bigger stage than the Rotary Club of Keokuk, Iowa.

An intriguing new book by Stanford University political scientist James Fishkin, “When the People Speak,” provides a hint of a new twist that might be added to the Republican calendar before the 2012 primaries. Fishkin, who heads Stanford’s Center for Deliberative Democracy, has long been promoting the idea of combining survey research with face-to-face deliberations to arrive at a portrait of public opinion that is more thoughtful than top-of-the-head responses to pollster questions. (Journalistic full disclosure: I have written about Fishkin before and have spoken at his invitation at a conference at Stanford).

Imagine if pollsters selected a random sample of self-identified Republicans and flew them all expenses paid to spend a weekend meeting with all the 2012 Republican presidential contenders at a conference center or on a college campus. This demographic cross-section of the Republican Party (maybe 500 people) would not only hear the stump speeches, but would also question the candidates and their advisers. At the end of the weekend, these now well-informed voters would cast secret ballots for president rendering a verdict on the 2012 GOP field that would put straw polls and name recognition-dominated national surveys to shame.

Impossible? Not if you lured candidates with exhaustive TV coverage. If you arranged to hold this in-person national poll a month or two before the Iowa caucuses, candidates (front-runners as well as impossible dreamers) could easily

calculate that they would get more momentum out of winning this made-for-television event than dutifully making their fourth pilgrimage to Sioux City. In the age of the billion-dollar presidential race, the cost should not be a deterrent. As Fishkin put it in an interview, “We could put the country in one room and have a dialogue on the issues for \$1.5 million.”

I can testify to the fascination for a political junkie in seeing a demographic sample of American voters in a single place. In early 1996, about a month before the Iowa caucuses, Fishkin and the Public Broadcasting System pulled this off by flying 459 voters to Austin, Texas, to attend an event billed as the National Issues Convention. The convention was bipartisan (even though Bill Clinton was unopposed for the Democratic nomination) and there were no candidate preference polls. Even though the exasperatingly high-minded stress on issues rather than candidates drained some of the drama out of the event, Vice President Al Gore and all the leading GOP contenders (except for Bob Dole) participated by satellite TV hookups.

This time around, Fox News would be the ideal broadcast venue for (let’s give it a new name) the National In-Person Republican Poll. A consortium of conservative publications like The Weekly Standard and National Review could also play host — and open up the deliberations to live coverage by all cable news networks. At a time, unfortunately, when many Republicans believe that

liberal bias lurks under every byline and “elitist” is a withering put-down, it would be imperative to find credible sponsors whose involvement would not inadvertently limit participation by a cross-section of GOP voters.

Maybe it is best to think of this as the ultimate political reality show. Picture Sarah Palin, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Tim Pawlenty and the rest all stranded on an island (maybe fly everybody to Hawaii in winter) with 500 eager Republican voters. Who will be voted off the island first and forced to return in ignominy to the Iowa caucuses or (horrors!) his or her day job? What unlikely contender (the political equivalent of Sarah Boyle) will startle the voters with his or her unexpected burst of talent?

But there is a serious point here — presidential politics are dominated by fake manifestations of public opinion. An important way station in Republican politics is the pre-season Iowa straw poll in Ames, which purports to be a microcosm of the roughly 15 percent of Republican voters who attend the caucuses. So we are talking about a dubious fraction of a fraction. But candidates squander millions (free-spending Steve Forbes spent more than \$300 per straw poll vote in 1999) to win the entirely symbolic straw poll.

The next few months are probably the last time it will be possible to talk about adding events to the Republican presidential calendar without being accused of tilting the scales in favor of a

specific candidate. As a political reporter, I confess to the self-interested belief that it would be irresistible to watch the GOP presidential contenders woo a national random sample of voters. But beyond the theater of an entire political party assembled in one room, such an event might also assist the Republicans in choosing a nominee who could stand up under close scrutiny from real-life voters. And if the National In-Person Republican Poll (Trademark Office, here we come) helps little-known candidates with serious records gain traction, so much the better for democracy.

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