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A Republican Civil War?

The Republican Party is split. But is it deeply divided to the point where one side is likely to bolt the party if the other side wins the nomination? Not yet. But it's early. The possibility of a civil war is still a distant threat. But not an unthinkable one.

Right now, there are conflicting signals. When Mitt Romney was invited to speak at a Tea Party Express rally in New Hampshire

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on September 1, another Tea Party-affiliated group, FreedomWorks, staged a protest. They complained that Romney's record "represents everything the Tea Party stands against" and said they had to defend the Tea Party brand "against poseurs."

Other Tea Party groups backed the invitation for Romney to speak. In the end, FreedomWorks did stage a separate protest. But it was largely a bust, lasting only about eight minutes. One speaker stood in front of a sign that read, "Romney = RINO" (Republican in name only).

A CNN poll finds the GOP split down the middle. Half of Republicans call themselves Tea Party supporters. Half do not. The big difference is ideological. Nearly 80% of Tea

Party Republicans are conservatives. Almost half of non-Tea Party Republicans identify themselves as moderate or liberal. It's a split between a rising ideological movement and the traditional Republican establishment.

It looks like Tea Party Republicans have their candidate for 2012—Rick Perry. And establishment Republicans have theirs—Mitt Romney. Steel-cage death match? Not quite. Perry is the top choice for Tea Party Republicans (Perry 40%, Romney 19% in the CNN poll). But Perry also edges out Romney among establishment Republicans (Perry 24%, Romney 21%). It's early, remember. Perry has only been in the race a few weeks. In the New York Times-CBS News poll, nearly half of Republicans had no opinion of Perry, favorable or unfavorable.

In the CNN poll, 44% of Tea Party Republicans say they would be "enthusiastic" if Perry were the nominee. Less so if Romney wins (28%). Establishment Republicans are

Presidential Preferences of the...

	Tea Party Republicans	Establishment Republicans
	40%	24%
	19%	21%

CNN/ORC poll 9/9-9/11

not thrilled by either contender (24% would be enthusiastic about Romney and the same number about Perry).

The CNN poll reveals signs of division. Tea Party Republicans give top priority to deficit-reduction over job creation. Establishment Republicans put jobs first. Tea Party Republicans are far more anti-government: 62% want to abolish the federal Department of Education, compared to 22% of establishment Republicans. Forty percent of Tea Party Republicans agree with Perry that social security is “failure.” Only 27% of establishment Republicans agree.

Religion could become a flash point. Tea Party Republicans are more anti-abortion, more doubtful about evolution and global warming, and more critical of same-sex marriage. Perry is an evangelical Christian. Romney is Mormon. In the CBS-Times poll, more than one third of Republican primary voters said that “most people [they] know” would not vote for a Mormon candidate for President.

The most striking difference is the level of anger. Fifty percent of Tea Party Republicans polled by CNN said they are “very angry” about the way things are going in the country; 29% of establishment Republicans feel the same way.

The Tea Party is a movement. A movement is different from a coalition. To be part of a coalition, you only have to agree on one thing: you want the party’s candidate to win. If you do, then you’re “one of us.” A movement insists that you agree on a whole list of things—taxes, abortion, social security, global warming, health care, same-sex marriage, etc. If you don’t agree with everything, you’re suspect. Romney is suspect to some Tea Party supporters.

The test for Republicans will come if the polls begin to show that Romney can beat Obama and Perry can’t. Then Republicans may decide Perry is too risky and go for Rom-

ney. Will Tea Party Republicans go along? Some will. Others may not. One can imagine some factions of the Tea Party—there are many—deciding that Romney is no better than Obama and running an independent candidate. It would almost certainly be a fringe candidate. No Republican who wants to retain any influence in the party would want to turn himself, or herself, into another Pat Buchanan. But there are likely to be political consultants who see an independent campaign as a good way to rake in money.

If Perry were the nominee and Michael Bloomberg were to run for President as an independent, one can imagine the New York City mayor getting a lot of support from establishment Republicans. Bloomberg has the money to fund his own campaign. So does Donald Trump, but Trump seems to want to preserve his relationship with the GOP.

The standard for a long, hard-fought contest between two serious candidates was set by the Democrats in 2008. But the issue differences between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were relatively small. And while Obama was the leader of a political movement, it wasn’t a movement of angry voters. Obama’s theme was “hope.” A long, hard-fought contest between Perry and Romney next year could be far more damaging to the party. ■

