

8-19-2011

Direct Appeal

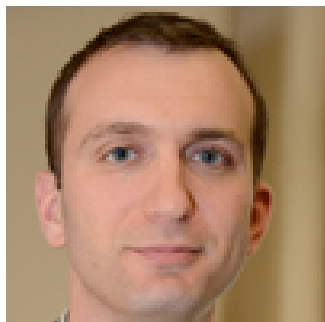
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For voters' sake, candidates deserve free air time

By Dan Birdsong, University of Dayton political science lecturer

Without a primary or caucus vote, Governor Tim Pawlenty has dropped out of the race for the Republican nomination for President after his third place finish at the meaningless Ames Iowa Straw Poll. Over the same weekend, Governor Rick Perry announced his candidacy for the race even though he came in a distant sixth as a write-in candidate.

Already Rick Perry is part of the "top tier" of candidates, at least according to the Sunday morning political shows. He apparently joins an elite group: Mitt Romney and Ames Iowa Straw Poll winner, Michelle Bachmann. What is unclear is why these three candidates are part of the "top tier." If the straw poll results are to be taken seriously, then why is Ron Paul not considered in the "top tier?" He was, after all, a very close second to Michelle Bachmann in Ames. Maybe if we take a look at the scientific survey results, that will help explain why the Paul candidacy is not suitable for the "top tier." Nope.

In polls by CNN, Fox, USA Today and Gallup, Ron Paul is in the top three or four; these results only reinforce that Ron Paul should be included in this "top tier." Still, the media coverage seems to dismiss the Ron Paul candidacy before the tallying of any votes, and Paul is not the only one. At last count, there are 11 candidates running for the Republican nomination: how many can you name?

One role the media play is holding candidates and elected leaders accountable for the things they say and for their behavior. It is not to pick and choose the winners. It is not bias for journalists to question a candidate's version of reality. However, it is bias, and borderline unethical, for those in the media to discount a candidate before any caucuses or primaries. By not covering candidates, the media deny voters the opportunity to learn about the candidates.

What is more, by discounting candidates' campaigns, the media deny the primary voters the opportunity to make their voices heard at the ballot box. Candidates should have equal opportunity to reach the public, and voters should have equal opportunity to hear from the candidates.

To remedy this, presidential candidates should receive free television airtime. They do this in democracies like Great Britain. The networks, instead of showing reality shows, could play a positive role for our elections. The candidates would be able reach the public and the public could learn about the candidates. Instead of 30-second negative ads, candidates could spend time talking about issues. The media's fact-checking of the candidates' statements would continue to the public's benefit.

This proposal would have the added benefit of reducing the role of money in electoral politics since candidates wouldn't need to spend so much money buying airtime throughout the country. Underfinanced and lesser-known candidates would then have an equal opportunity to claim "top tier" status from the audience that matters most — the voters.

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Background on Dan Birdsong: Areas of expertise include politics, public opinion and the media. He is a lecturer at the University of Dayton, teaching courses on American Politics and Global Politics. He has a background in polling and policy research. He is currently conducting research into how people consume news in an era of multiple sources and new media. Research on how and where people get their news will help create a better understanding of public opinion. Birdsong received his Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati where he worked from 2005-09 at the Institute for Policy Research on the Ohio Poll, the Ohio Health Issues Poll and the Greater Cincinnati Survey. Contact him at 937-229-2594 or dbirdsong1@notes.udayton.edu.

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