

6-15-2015

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June 15, 2015 1.35pm EDT



To hug or not to hug? Jason Reed/Reuters

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Now that Jeb Bush has finally officially announced his bid for the White House, the chattering class can shift its conversation to whether he will win and what hurdles stand in his way.

The people in his way

Anyone paying attention to the 2016 scuttlebutt can give you the names of some of the bigger obstacles in his path to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Perhaps the most obvious would be Hillary Clinton, who will almost certainly be the Democratic nominee despite the best efforts of Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley.

Indeed, in the dozens of major national polls that have tracked opinion dynamics about likely 2016 matchups, Clinton has beaten Bush in all but one, a recent FOX News poll that showed the former Florida governor leading by only one point, within the margin of error.

Those savvy to what political scientists call "the invisible primary" would likely also suggest the names Rand Paul, Scott Walker, and Marco Rubio, who have so far shaped up to be Bush's key opponents in the run for the Republican Party's nomination.

Although Bush has routinely polled in the double digits over the past several months, his numbers in most major polls have remained relatively flat, if not on a slight decline, showing that, if nothing else, Bush has so far been unable to separate himself from the pack.

All of these names represent formidable challenges, but there is one more that Bush will have to deal with in order to even get to the general election: his brother, former President George W Bush.

Bush 43 doesn't get good marks

Conventional wisdom suggests that Jeb Bush's older brother will be a drag on his campaign, that bad memories of the last Bush Administration will dampen enthusiasm for the potential next one.

These are not unreasonable assertions.

George W Bush left office with one of the lowest presidential approval ratings in the modern era. And subsequent studies of how Bush 43 stacks up against other presidents have not shown much positive change.

In fact, in a recent analysis of presidential greatness conducted by Brandon Rottinghaus of the University of Houston and myself, George W Bush ranked in the bottom ten, in between Richard Nixon, who resigned in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, and John Tyler, who was actually elected to the Confederacy's House of Representatives when the South seceded from the Union.

It suffices to say, George W Bush's reputation among academic elites has not yet rebounded from his end-of-presidency nadir.

Pundits who peddle this logic, however, miss other important parts of the big picture.

Pundits and public: two different things

Academics might not be keen on the last Bush administration, but that does not mean the mass public feels the same way.

Quite the opposite - a recent poll conducted by CNN showed that not only has the number of those reporting a favorable impression of the former president raised from about 1/3 of the population at the end of his presidency to a slight majority in late May.


In fact, a greater number of respondents approved of Bush than President Obama.

Skeptics might explain this as nothing more than public amnesia - we tend to be more critical of the person actually sitting in the Oval Office than those who previously sat there - but others point to a developing narrative that partially redeems Bush's foreign policy while noting the Obama Administration's failure to repudiate much of it.

Exhibit #1 in this argument is the ongoing struggle against ISIS, which critics maintain only emerged because the Obama Administration squandered the gains made in the Middle East by failing to secure a new status of forces agreement.

In the coming months, this should be kept in mind when reading articles that criticize Jeb Bush's reluctance to separate himself from his brother or condemn his choices concerning the war in Iraq.

Pundits might think statements such as Jeb's comment that he leans on advice from his brother about foreign affairs ridiculous, but for a public that increasingly views George W favorably and just might appreciate such familial loyalty, perhaps it is not so ill-advised, after all.

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