

Political Preview

Who's Going to Win and Why ... Sort Of

By Tom Schuman

One of the positives about publishing a bimonthly magazine is that you have time to research stories, develop key sources of information and be flexible. One of the potential negatives is that in election years, previewing the November races must occur in the September-October edition. That means our roundtable discussion takes place in mid-July. So where do you go to find four people ready to hash out political issues when escaping hot and humid weather is the focus instead of worrying about whether it will rain (or heaven forbid, snow) on Election Day?

Actually, no problem at all. Four e-mails yielded a political columnist, radio talk show host and two bloggers with self-admitted partisan leanings who are active in the political world. They may have ignored a few of the cautions to “not all speak at the same time,” but the result was an expansive look at a number of topics you will continue to see, hear and read about prior to November 4.

Honestly, we like the early election coverage in this issue. Sure, we may not have known who the vice presidential candidates are or if that “major blunder” had occurred yet when this dialogue was taking place, but the panel’s insights, opinions and a few predictions offer plenty to ponder. In fact, they offered so much that we ran out of room here. Check out the Chamber blog at www.indianachamberblogs.com under the Indiana politics category to read more from our participants:

Our Experts:

- **Joshua Gillespie**, a political strategist who also heads up the Hoosier Access blog. He admits to once idolizing Alex P. Keaton from the “Family Ties” television program, thinking “I would be the next big-time young Republican.”
- **Jeff Pruitt**, a lifelong Democrat and Kansas native who came to Fort Wayne in 2000. He started the Fort Wayne Politics blog earlier this year. An activist for public access and openness in government, he says that at the local level he will “hammer on whoever needs to be hammered on.”
- **Abdul Hakim-Shabazz**, the self-described “freak in the bunch.” He hosts a morning talk show on WXNT radio in Indianapolis, is a lawyer, teaches at Ivy Tech Community College and blogs through various venues. After working in the political and media worlds in Illinois, he claims, “the only way to tell the difference between Republicans and Democrats there is that Democrats go to jail in Joliet and Republicans go to jail in Southern Illinois, in Marion.”
- **Matt Tully**, political columnist for the *Indianapolis Star* who supplements his print writing with the Political Junkie blog. He previously worked in the media in Washington, D.C. and in his hometown of Gary. Recalling his days of youth and that region’s longtime connections with Illinois, he admits, “We’d say, oh, Jim Thompson is our governor.”

A House divided

Much of Indiana’s attention every two years is focused on the battle for control of the Indiana House. Tully acknowledges the very close races and “microissues” that ultimately seem to decide some of these contests, but offers that “going in, you definitely would rather be the quarterback for the Democrats because of all the other things falling into place.”

Pruitt says in his own analysis that he couldn’t come up with a seat currently held by a Democrat that would go to a Republican. “I found seven that I thought were in play in the other direction.” He adds that, projecting today, “five of those will probably swap. Obviously things change, but right now it definitely looks strong for the House for Democrats.”

Gillespie doesn’t dispute the Democrat leanings, but does question how much the presidential

run of Barack Obama “will actually trickle down to the lower races. How many of those people who potentially vote for Obama in November will also turn around and vote for Gov. Daniels and will vote for (Republican) Jon Elrod (seeking to be re-elected in House District 97 after initially challenging for the 7th Congressional District seat)? There’s going to be a lot of crossover.”

Abdul (Hakim-Shabazz is too difficult to type this many times) agrees that there will be a high number of Obama-Daniels voters and offers that it should be individuals’ responsibility to go through the ballot and vote in all the races. “Personally, I think straight ticket voting should be illegal.”

New considerations

Among the many dynamics affecting the November vote are race and gender. A black man running for president on the Democratic ticket and a female gubernatorial nominee in Indiana are charting new territory. In addition, Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman seeks her second term with Daniels.

Gillespie notes that as much as he hates to make the distinction, the Obama-Jill Long Thompson combination “only helps Republicans in Southern Indiana. I know there are people who will look beyond race or gender, but there are those (who won’t) ...”

Tully, who lived in both Lake and Porter counties – undeniably the most Democratic leaning part of the state – adds, “There are plenty of people who vote Democratic who would have a big problem with an African-American candidate. It does cross party lines.

“One thing I’m always struck by is how there’s all this fanfare about a poll showing 78% of the people says they’re comfortable with a woman being president or an African-American being president. That’s 22% who say no or no opinion. Twenty-two percent is a big number in politics when so many races come down to single digits.”

Abdul asks more than he answers in offering, “It will be interesting to know: will the people who vote for Barack because he’s black or vote for Jill because she’s a woman outnumber the people that will vote against? I think it’s probably about 25% of your electorate that bases its opinion solely on that, so which part will outdo the other?”

Pruitt doesn’t consider those factors significant in the outcome. He believes that as many people that might be driven away from a candidate based on race or gender will be drawn to the person for similar reasons.

All about Daniels

Tully covered the Daniels campaign in 2004 and has been along for the ride during the first term in office. He offers insights into the impact of the always

interesting governor seeking re-election.

“I think this election is solely, or at least a vast majority, a referendum on Mitch Daniels, and it’s not going to be much about Jill Long Thompson. It’s going to be, ‘Am I OK with this guy, in giving him another four years.’



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*Abdul Hakim-Shabazz
WXNT Radio*

“As far as coattails, people seem to be OK with Mitch Daniels in Central Indiana. Up north, my guess is that the RV is not going to put nearly as many miles on it this year because they’re probably going to have to just write off a few counties,” he continues, adding that some Republican county chairs in the south don’t see the governor helping with their election strategy for their candidates.

“It probably doesn’t matter too much what he (Daniels) does between now and the end of the year,” Tully concludes. “People have a view of him. Although every time he says, ‘Hey, I know it’s been tough; I know I’ve made some decisions you didn’t like’ – I think that helps him.”

Pruitt confirms that Daniels has his detractors in Northeast Indiana, even among Republicans, and that Long Thompson is very popular in the area. He fears the Democrats, however, made a tactical mistake in Indianapolis earlier this year.

“With Daniels, I think the Democrats missed a golden opportunity to bury him. The race would have been much more in their favor had the state Democrats come out with a property tax plan,” Pruitt contends. “They had absolutely nothing. They sat back and did nothing. Offered no suggestions, no policy.”

Abdul notes that someone “made a calculated decision that property taxes would just sink or swim around his (the governor’s) neck. Was it a mistake? Hindsight is always 20/20.”

Keeping it close

A sidetrack into whether Long Thompson or Jim Schellinger would have been the best general election opponent for Daniels includes Tully stating, “I think Schellinger ran one of the worst campaigns ... and if you do that in



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*Joshua Gillespie
Hoosier Access*

the primary, you're going to do it in the fall too."

As for Daniels vs. Long Thompson:

Tully: "I don't see any reason this becomes a blowout, especially early on."

Abdul: "If Daniels wins, it will probably be about what it was the last time, 53-47 or 54-46, because races always tend to tighten up toward the end. If Jill Long Thompson wins, I will argue that it won't be because of anything she did. It will be because of the dynamics and the environment she was in.



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*Jeff Pruitt
Fort Wayne Politics*

But, in politics, a win is a win and you take your mandate and run with it."

Pruitt: Admitting to a regional bias, he says, "I think it's going to be much more competitive than maybe people think. I think Long Thompson will do very well up north. Can she win? Probably depends on how Barack Obama does. But I don't think it's going to be a blowout race."

New to the process

In addition to the candidates at the top of their respective tickets, what about the competitive Democratic primary that attracted hundreds of thousands of new voters?

With Indiana mattering at the national level for the first time in 40 years and no real races of note on the Republican side, Abdul was not surprised "that so many people flocked to the Democratic primary. People tend to go where the action is. Is that going to be the same in November? I doubt it very seriously."

Gillespie surmises that the new voters are the "wild card because no one knows where they're going to go." With Obama running ads and setting up Indiana offices in the summertime (and the potential for Indiana Sen. Evan Bayh to be his running mate at the time of this discussion), "that frightens the heck out of me. I really wasn't all that impressed with Sen. (John) McCain. I say Indiana is very much in play. As a Republican, that scares me."

Pruitt cautions to look beyond the voting statistics and consider the number of new people who get engaged as volunteers and donors. "I think that will have a significant impact. I think the state is in play and if Evan Bayh gets added to the ticket, it becomes real serious real quick. I don't think McCain will just be able to rely on Mitch Daniels. I think he'll have to show up and campaign."

A survey showing 78% of Democrats thrilled with their choice for president compared to 26% of Republicans concerns Gillespie.

"McCain doesn't have enough support in his own party to guarantee he can win Indiana, let alone win the states he should nationally," he conjectures. "He's going to have to be able to energize his own base."

The low public perception of President Bush is another ingredient in the mix. Pruitt doesn't see how McCain will overcome that "killing of the Republican brand nationally. It just seems like a daunting task, and I wouldn't want to be responsible for trying to pull that off."

"If you're a Republican and you're smart," Abdul states, "you'll make it more about you as the individual, not about you as a Republican because Republicans are swimming upstream big time. The only way you can win is if you don't tell anybody you're a Republican."

Tully points to Indiana's three congressional incumbents losing in 2006 and a large number of mayors being ousted in 2007. "Clearly the Republican brand is in dire straights, but I think the incumbent brand is the one that's really damaged right now." He recalls that voters in the 2007 Indianapolis election were only partially joking when they asked whether they could vote straight ticket anti-incumbent.

"If Republicans can exploit that anti-incumbent atmosphere by saying, 'Well, who's in charge of Congress right now?' ... A lot of the anger that we've seen here in Indiana, at least in the last couple of years, has been about incumbents and not so much party."

Log in and blog

As noted earlier, each of the panelists participates in blogging to some degree. Candidates, political parties and the like are paying increasing attention to all online activities, including the blogosphere. Much more difficult to measure, however, is the ultimate impact that blogging might have.

Getting straight to the point, Abdul claims, "If you're not a grown-up,



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*Matt Tully
Indianapolis Star*

or mature candidate or campaign, the blogs will just tear you up and eat you alive because you will let them get to you. Part of the problem with a lot of campaigns is this need to respond to every little thing that shows up. (If you do that), you'll never spend any time doing anything else."

Gillespie doesn't buy into the theory by some that blogs "are the be-all, end-all for being able to take down candidates. I do think that we have a little bit of impact." He cites the internal GOP battle for attorney general this year, noting an outside column that stated maybe 20% of the convention delegates read blogs, but on the day of the convention "100% of the people were talking about what was going on on the blogs or what the blogs had already been talking about. When you have campaigns that are blogging, you know it has an effect for some people."

Tully's political blog was on a summer hiatus due to other assignments, but he also sees online reader reaction to his newspaper columns. The feedback often doesn't measure up to expectations.

"It's popular as far as people leaving comments. It's lost a little bit of its influence," he shares, "because a lot readers realize it's just a place where people go to scream and yell and say mean things and get off on tangents that have nothing to do with the topic at hand. It hasn't become the community conversation that I think a lot of people hoped it would."

His focus, he says, needs to be on the 300,000-some newspaper subscribers, the vast majority who aren't commenting on the web site or reading a blog. "It would be interesting on Election Day to do a poll on how many of the people voting read a blog in the past 30 days, to get a sense of how influential they really are."

Pruitt does say the prevalence of blogs and online sites speeds up the news cycle and creates insiders. "The people that are reading these blogs are people that really care about local politics. I think it's just a new tool that people are still kicking around to figure out what it can and can't do. Does it really drive a race one way or the other? Probably not. It may in the future, but right now it's not."

Gillespie and Pruitt emphasize that they strive to do fact-checking on the information they receive. Abdul, when he receives information from people on both sides of the aisle, cautions the blog readers with "this is what I hear," or "here's a conversation I overheard."

"It's like those little gossip columns of the 1950s, but it's pretty clear this isn't factual; it's just what I heard. You take it for what it's worth." A pitfall, he cautions, is the same people

commenting over and over. At times, he feel like, "Man, don't you guys have a job. This isn't all I do."

Making a difference

Although some predictions emerged as part of the debate, we close with asking the panelists to simply choose one factor that could have a major impact over the final few months of the campaign.

The most obvious, according to Pruitt, is the potential selection of Bayh as a running mate. "That would give Democrats statewide a boost. Would it be enough to swing specific races? I don't know, but it definitely won't hurt."

With the heightened interest among the public, Tully sees increased attention being played to convention speeches, debates and other major appearances.

"As Abdul was saying earlier, Democrats seem to like Barack Obama more than Republicans like John McCain, but a lot of people are still concerned that this guy was in the state Senate just four years ago – is he ready to lead the country," Tully notes. "The main thing to watch is how – from Mitch Daniels and Jill Long Thompson to John McCain and Barack Obama – they perform on the big stages when a lot of people get to sit down and watch them perform."

Abdul says he was thinking along the same lines as Tully, but whether it comes in a major setting or takes place originally behind the scenes, "It's look for the next big screw-up. Not just a little small gaffe, but a screw-up that goes to the heart of what the candidate is talking about. Who does it, how well do they respond and how well do they fix it."

Gillespie admits difficulty envisioning 2008 playing out well for the Republicans nationally, but looks to the future with a "basic party restructuring after 2008. They will start gearing up for 2010 and 2012. It's not a throwaway year for them by any means, but they're learning how they're going to have to really work at being in the minority. One thing to look for is a better Republican Party after '08."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Joshua Gillespie at <http://hoosieraccess.com>

Jeff Pruitt at <http://fortwaynepolitics.com>

Abdul Hakim-Shabazz at www.wxnt.com

Matt Tully at www.indystar.com