



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 13, 2011

GOP Debate Tonight in Manchester, New Hampshire

Mavericks win! Too late for McCain and Palin. The first Republican presidential debate in New Hampshire for the 2012 campaign season will be held tonight at Saint Anselm College in Manchester and in the geopolitical lingo of the new world order, “the coalition of the willing” will attempt to exercise “lead change” on perceived front runner Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor who would like to have New Hampshire voters think of him as State Farm. Like a good neighbor, Romney is there.



But he was there in 2008 as well, and lost to the guy from Arizona. Perhaps distance does lend enchantment. Things have changed considerably since 1960, when Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kennedy’s proximity to New Hampshire led all other aspirants for the Democratic presidential nomination to go hunting for votes and delegates elsewhere. All but one. Paul Fisher, a Chicago manufacturer of ballpoint pens, actually came to the Granite State to challenge Kennedy and managed to have a debate with the charming young Bay State Senator at the University of New Hampshire. The debate apparently produced no memorable moments and Fisher did not score the upset he was seeking. Kennedy won handily.

The “home field advantage” in New Hampshire was still considered formidable in 1972, when Senator Ed Muskie of Maine, Hubert Humphrey’s running mate four years earlier, was supposed to win big in New Hampshire because it was his “neighboring state.” Muskie won, but not by a big enough margin according to the pundits, who still weighed the neighbor factor heavily. Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, that year’s Granite State runner up, got the “bounce” out of his surprising finish in New Hampshire and went on to win the nomination.

Eight years later, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts pretty much destroyed the myth of the home field advantage when he lost in New Hampshire to President Jimmy Carter, who had all but made New Hampshire his second home when he campaigned in the Granite State primary of 1976. Half or more of New Hampshire Democrats, it seemed, had homes that could boast, “President Carter slept here.” Carter won the nomination, but his battles with Kennedy took some of the starch out of the Georgian’s already fading presidency and Carter lost that year to former California Governor Ronald Reagan.

Yet the myth of the home field advantage dies hard. When New Hampshire Senator Bob Smith threatened to enter the presidential primary of 2000, some Granite Staters actually worried that having a “favorite son” in the race would kill the “golden goose” that the primary had become for New Hampshire by keeping all of the other candidates away, much as the presidential candidacy of Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin in 1992 effectively killed that year’s Iowa caucuses for the Democrats. Smith never did enter the primary, going off instead on a short-lived independent campaign. But it’s not likely his presence in the primary would have scared away the likes of George W. Bush and John McCain, anyway.



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But Romney is more than a neighbor. He has a summer home on Lake Winnepesaukee and is actually a part-time New Hampshire resident. He is said to be investing more time and money in New Hampshire and less in Iowa than he did for the 2008 campaign. A New Hampshire win is crucial before the campaign heads down to South Carolina and other parts of the “Bible belt” where Baptists and Evangelicals are not known for their tender affections for, and confidence in, Mormons.

Romney is the perceived frontrunner, but there is much leftover weight he carries in his saddle bags, beginning with his sponsorship of the health care plan for Massachusetts, familiarly known as “RomneyCare.” If Romney has to spend half or more of his debate time explaining why RomneyCare is not the same as ObamaCare, universally hated by Republicans, he will be on the defensive from the start, not a good place to be for a challenger seeking to unseat an incumbent. Then there are the liberal stands on abortion and on “gay rights” that Romney took as a candidate for U.S. Senate and for governor and during his four years as the Bay State’s chief executive. He has done a 180-degree change on those issues, but is that credible to the party’s conservatives? That Romney would have trouble in the South has already been noted. But could he, as the party’s nominee, carry his home state of Massachusetts? The Commonwealth nearly always goes Democratic in presidential elections, resisting even the Nixon 49-state landslide of 1972. (“Don’t blame me, I’m from Massachusetts” bumper stickers were popular during and after the Watergate crisis.) Ronald Reagan carried Massachusetts in his 49-state win in 1984, but Republican and independent voters knew Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan was a friend of theirs. And Mitt Romney is no Ronald Reagan.

In the Republican primary of 1996, when GOP contenders fell to quarreling among themselves, one of their number, Congressman “B-1 bomber” Bob Dornan of California, would remind them, “The target is Clinton.” So while the other Republican candidates will appear to be aiming their verbal assaults at President Barack Obama, Romney, unlucky fellow, will just happen to be in the way. Surely they mean him no harm, especially if he should turn out to be the party’s standard-bearer. But the religious sentiment that comes to mind is not Mormon, but Quaker. An armed Quaker guarding his home is said to have advised an intruder that it would be wise for him to leave promptly. “Friend, I would not harm thee for the world,” the Quaker maintained. “But thou standeth where I am about to shoot.”

Mitt Romney, New Hampshire’s good neighbor, is standing in the same place.



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