**The New Race for White House: Ted Cruz vs. Marco Rubio**

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Words roll off the tongue of the Cuban-American, his demeanor firm and reassuring, his supporters enthusiastic and loud. These words depict not one, but two GOP presidential candidates: Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. Both Cuban-Americans are in their forties, possess formidable debating skills, have served only one term in the Senate, and suddenly have found themselves one step away from the top spot in the GOP polls, arguably with the best chance for the nomination. Yet, their similarities end there. Cruz has depicted himself as tough-on-immigration and the fiery anti-establishment candidate, while Rubio has positioned himself as the establishment favorite, a candidate who is defined by strength in foreign policy, ready for balanced immigration reform, and able to appeal to all demographics. Over the past few weeks, those differences have come into sharp contrast, and the race between them has only just begun. With Ben Carson fast fading, Donald Trump viewed as unviable for the general election, and no other candidate receiving double digits in the polls, the new race for the GOP nomination is between two Cuban-Americans – Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio – and each would have a remarkably different path to the nomination.

Ted Cruz is known colloquially as the “most hated man in the Senate.” His persona is defined by a stubborn, anti-establishment attitude, and he has spent his career in the Senate attacking career politicians and refusing to compromise. At a time when fed-up voters are time and again picking outsider candidates, that reputation holds immense advantages, and in fact positions Cruz as the alternative to Donald Trump. When, or if, Trump finally falls, his supporters will have to back someone, and it seems increasingly likely that that someone will be Ted Cruz. Compared to the other candidates, Cruz has been practically allies with Trump throughout the race. In September, the two men appeared side by side at a rally about the Iran Deal, undeniably linking Cruz with Trump in the eyes of both their supporters.⁠1 More recently, in November, Trump mentioned Cruz as a possible choice for his vice-president, saying that Cruz “is agreeing with me one hundred percent.”⁠2 A few weeks later, Cruz asserted that, if he becomes president, not only would he build a wall along the Mexican border, but he would also hire Donald Trump to build it.⁠3 When Trump’s supporters are forced to choose another candidate, they will choose a man who has promised to attack the establishment and remain tough on immigration, never offering any form of amnesty, and the candidate that best fits that description is Cruz. Adding Trump’s supporters to Cruz’s current poll numbers would give the senator the support of over 40% of Republican voters, enough to win several primary states while the rest of the votes remain scattered amongst the ten establishment candidates.

Cruz’s ability to shore up support doesn’t end there. He has another benefit that Trump could never have: his ability to shore up Evangelical support. With a pastor as a father, Cruz has spoken openly about his faith in Iowa, talking about “the power of prayer” and pledging to form a “national prayer team.” So far, he has been successful in gaining the support of over two hundred of the most influential evangelical leaders.⁠4 Ben Carson has been consistently seen as the religious favorite, but as his questionable policy answers lead to his downfall, his evangelical supporters will likely switch to Cruz. After the fall of Trump and Carson, Cruz will lock down not just the angry, anti-establishment voters, but also the far-right, religious Republican base. With these two essential voting blocs on his side, the Texas senator could quite possibly *cruise* to the nomination.

Yet, the man that will undeniably stand in his way will be Marco Rubio, a candidate who resides on the other end of the spectrum. While Cruz shores up the far-right and anti-politician bases, Rubio will focus on the large bloc of moderate voters and the Republican establishment. Cruz’s strategy relies on the fall of Donald Trump, but Rubio has the much easier task of consolidating the disjointed support of the other establishment candidates. As Jeb Bush and Scott Walker have fallen, and none of the other establishment candidates have gotten out of the starting gate, Rubio is arguably the new favorite of traditional Republicans. Currently the highest polling establishment candidate, Rubio has been endorsed by nine sitting members of Congress, while Bush, long assumed to be the party favorite, has only received two.⁠5 As Bush continues to struggle, a major Republican donor has already chosen to back Rubio, a sign that the Florida senator has replaced Bush as the establishment candidate of choice.⁠6 As the field winnows down, supporters of Bush, Kasich, Huckabee, Christie, and the other mainstream candidates will likely switch to Rubio, placing him within reach of the top spot in the polls.

The rise of Rubio comes with an undeniable theme: the Florida senator has the best chance against Hillary Clinton in the fall. Young, Hispanic, and a fresh face in Washington, Rubio would stand in sharp contrast to Hillary Clinton, who has been entrenched in Washington for decades. Incredibly articulate, Rubio has benefited from strong debate performances, and his widespread appeal has shown in his favorability ratings, which remain among the highest in the field.⁠7 This number is perhaps the most important, because it can predict future potential for support. Candidates who are viewed unfavorably by the general populace, such as Trump, aren’t that likely to gain the support of undecided or independent voters, nor will they receive the supporters of the other candidates as they drop out. In contrast, a candidate with a high favorability rating, such as Rubio, has a strong chance of not just converting other candidates’ supporters, but also attracting currently undecided voters and independents as Election Day draws near. Ultimately, Rubio may be seen as the candidate with the broadest appeal and the best chance to defeat Hillary Clinton, and that chance is what makes the prospect of a President Rubio not so far-fetched at all.

With Cruz and Rubio both poised with an excellent chance for the nomination, though for vastly different reasons, conflict between the two Cuban-Americans is inevitable. The two campaigns reside on opposite ends of the spectrum, just as their supporters do. While Cruz appeals to the voters seeking an outsider, who are fed up with career politicians, Rubio looks to the establishment for his support. Where Cruz is defined by anger, Rubio is defined by optimism. Their vastly different campaign tactics bring to light important policy differences as well. Over the past few weeks, Cruz has attacked Rubio on his weak point, immigration. While Rubio takes a far more moderate stance when it comes to immigration, Cruz’s positions on immigration align more with those of Donald Trump, and Cruz has frequently attacked Rubio for the bill he sponsored in the Senate, which provided a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. Yet, if Rubio is viewed as weak in immigration, he makes up for it with strength in foreign policy. As arguably the most hawkish foreign policy candidate in the field, Rubio has stood to gain from increased focus on national security issues in the wake of the Paris attacks, and he has begun to attack Cruz for his centrist opinions on foreign policy. When Cruz voted to scale back the federal counterterrorism surveillance programs, Rubio cited the vote as a threat to national security at a time when a domestic attack by ISIS seems more likely than ever. The policy distinction between the two senators is another indication of the gap between their bases, as they appeal to vastly different, though equally large, blocs of voters.

The GOP presidential field today seems jumbled and large, but inevitably it may narrow down to two candidates: Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. With the might of Trump’s former supporters and evangelical base on his side, Ted Cruz will face only one barrier to the nomination: Marco Rubio, the candidate with widespread appeal and the support of the establishment. The fall of Trump is in no way inevitable, but if it does come to pass, the two Cuban-Americans will likely be next in line. Regardless, one fact is for certain: while other candidates have begun their decline, the race between Cruz and Rubio has only just begun.

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