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Candidate Strategy Briefing: Chris Sununu

If you ask Republicans who the top dog in their party is at the moment, you will likely get a few answers. Former—and possibly future—President Donald Trump is the most obvious pick as the leader of the party, and the only serious candidate to have declared a campaign thus far, but his dominance has faced many challengers recently. Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley is expected to announce her bid for the Republican nomination later this month, and former New Jersey Governor and one-time presidential hopeful Chris Christie is also toying with a run. Trump’s most obvious threat is Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a veritable powerhouse among the far-right wing of the Republican party and a widely believed tough challenge for Trump in the primary.

While many pundits would tell you that DeSantis is Trump’s biggest threat, the Governor of New Hampshire says, when it comes to Republican governors, “Sorry, Ron, you’re No. 2” (Garrity, Politico). Chris Sununu, the aforementioned Governor of New Hampshire, believes he should be counted among the potential challengers to Donald Trump.

Sununu is uniquely positioned among Republicans as a socially moderate, fiscally conservative candidate. His conservative credentials on taxes, guns, and individual rights stack up with any Republican in the country, but his stances on many hot-button social issues are still tempered enough to appeal to independents and even moderate democrats.

As of today, Sununu has not announced his candidacy for president, which makes it hard to analyze his campaign thus far. However, he has taken several clear steps toward making a run for the Oval Office. Just recently, Sununu created the 501(c)(4), “Live Free or Die,” a National Political Committee widely seen as the first step in testing the waters for a potential presidential campaign (Korecki & Allen, NBC).

While I have no doubt Sununu would thrive in a general election context, he will likely struggle more in a Republican primary. The story of the 2022 midterms was the nationwide failure of Trump-backed candidates in general elections, but the important thing to note here is that these candidates won a lot of primaries.

We know from Theiss-Morse et al. that turnout in off-year Congressional elections are lower than in presidential elections (Theiss-Morse, et al., 59). This is even more true for off-year Congressional primaries. Political scientists attribute this low turnout to these elections to their low salience among voters—only voters who are highly interested and motivated to vote will actually turn out. Presidential primaries are much the same way. Most of the Republican primary voters in 2022 were highly motivated and highly ideological, and these voters selected many Trump-style candidates to represent their party in the November elections.

Trump is not Sununu’s only primary challenge, however. Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis are both hard-right candidates who will pose a stiff challenge to Sununu. Haley is seen as a genuine threat to Trump, and DeSantis is often said to be the true frontrunner in this race (Pengelly, The Guardian).

While a primary field saturated with far-right conservatives might be daunting to the Sununu campaign on the surface, it might actually be an advantage. When two or more ideologically similar candidates run in the same race, they split the same voter base and all fail to win an outright majority. While clearly not a direct comparison, Ross Perot’s performance in the 1992 election is a good example of this phenomenon in action. When running as an independent in 1992, he split the conservative vote with Incumbent President George H. W. Bush and allowed Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton to ride the remaining votes to victory (Theiss-Morse, 100). Sununu is less borderline-authoritarian, hard-right, and Trumpian than his potential opponents in this race, and this fact might actually work to his advantage.

Sununu’s biggest obstacle is his perception as a moderate Republican. Trump, Haley, and DeSantis are all seen by many to be deeply conservative, and to a highly ideological primary voter, this is a big advantage. He has worked to fight this image, doing so most recently at The Fifty, telling Politico that he is, in fact, America’s most conservative governor. He even took a shot at Ron DeSantis, saying, “Sorry Ron, you’re No. 2” (Garrity, Politico).

Sununu has the track record to back up these claims, being ranked by The Cato Institute—a well-known libertarian think tank—as America’s most conservative governor (governor.nh.org). He has booked three balanced state budgets in his time as Governor of New Hampshire, and his claim to conservative fame was his 2021 phase-out of the New Hampshire Interest & Dividends tax (governor.nh.org).

From his record, Governor Sununu is clearly a “real” conservative, so why is he seen as a moderate? Much of that perception comes from his record on social issues. He is not in favor of no-exception abortion bans, he has signed legislation to provide gender identity and sexual orientation protections in public schools, and established New Hampshire’s first civil rights enforcement unit (ontheissues.org). He has also been a fairly outspoken critic of Former President Trump, most recently saying Trump “can’t get it done” in a general election against Biden, and that he would be a “very extreme candidate” (Cohen, Politico).

This perception as a moderate would be a big boost in his primary chances if we accept the theory that Haley, DeSantis, and Trump will split the far-right vote. His ability to appeal to center-right voters, as well as to energize voters who might otherwise be turned off by the vitriol of the other three candidates, would be a boon to his chances in a Republican primary. If he plays his cards right, his far-right weakness might actually be a center-right strength.

Another potential hurdle for Governor Sununu is geography. He is from a small state, so carrying his state would not give him many delegates in a Republican primary or many electors in the Electoral College. There are two major advantages to being from New Hampshire, however. First, New Hampshire is very early in the Republican primary schedule. As an overwhelmingly popular governor, Sununu should have no trouble winning his home state. This early victory will certainly give him momentum as he heads into more competitive races later on in the year.

Second, New Hampshire is in the the non-south—a region which is generally more liberal. This position as a moderate conservative from the northeast will be a disadvantage in the south—a region characterized by ideological conservatism and religious fundamentalism. Sununu has proven himself to be highly popular among a certain group of non-south voters in his home state, and I suspect this positioning is likely due to his more moderate positioning as a politician, and this aspect of his candidacy will most certainly be an advantage in winning other non-south states throughout the primary.

While the aforementioned factors are more mixed in terms of their effects on Sununu’s potential campaign, the strength of his record is undeniably a big positive. He has a strong conservative record on fiscal responsibility, gun rights, election security, taxes, and abortion (ontheissues.org). He also regularly appears on Fox News—the most popular news channel in the nation and a great platform to build credibility with a conservative audience. Despite being from a small state in the non-south, having strong opponents, and being seen as moderate, Sununu seems to me to be well-positioned to win the Republican ticket next year if he plays his cards right.

As Sununu’s campaign manager, I would lean into his strong record and try to position him as a moderate in order to position him near the top of the pack, but I would avoid pushing too hard in the beginning. I do not want him to come into the summer as the front runner. My logic behind this is twofold. First, I want him to secure early wins in primaries where he has a good shot. New Hampshire is one of the first primary elections, and he will very easily win his own state. This will give him the image of being a serious contender and keep supporters motivated to participate in his campaign. Second, I want to keep him out of the lead because I want to keep as many far-right candidates in as long as I can to split the far-right vote in the early to middle primaries. I want Sununu to finish first or second in the early primaries but finishing second or third in the south. This will encourage Trump, DeSantis, and Haley to keep spending and keep dividing the far-right vote.

To support this strategy, Sununu’s campaign will focus on targeting likely voters in the middle-to-older age group. His record on fiscal policy will likely appeal heavily to this age demographic. We will not focus on younger voters as they are the least likely group to support us in the primaries, and we need to make waves early on in order to stay competitive in this crowded race.

The next group we will target are women. Women are more likely to be liberal than men (Theiss-Morse, et al., 138). As of late, they are also more likely to turn out to vote, as well (Theiss-Morse, et al., 61). These factors make them good targets for our campaign. We can convince the white women on the margins to move right on their fiscal views without compromising on social issues, and we are likely to turn them out to vote.

Finally, I want our campaign to target voters of color. We have discussed in class how immigrants are likely to be socially conservative, and attributed this to a desire to conform and fit in to American culture. Many Latino voters of color are also very religious, again increasing their odds of being conservative (Theiss-Morse, et al., 145). I believe more people of color would be willing to vote for Sununu because he is not antagonistic on race. He is by no means highly progressive on racial issues, but his lack of outward hostility towards people of color might encourage more of them to vote in line with their conservative beliefs and cross party lines for Sununu.

While facing clear problems—namely the race being crowded, being from a small, non-south state, and being perceived as moderate in the primaries—Sununu also has many ways of addressing these shortcomings in his campaign. First, he can leverage the many horses in the race and create a sort of “Ross Perot Effect,” allowing Trump, Haley, and DeSantis to fight for the same far-right vote while focusing himself on the moderate vote.

Second, even though New Hampshire is a small state, it is crucial in the primaries because of the calendar. I expect Sununu will have a strong showing in his home state which will give him momentum heading into the rest of the primary. New Hampshire is also a non-south state, and Sununu has cracked the code of popularity in his home state. Governor Sununu will likely perform worse in the south than his more conservative opponents, but I believe his ability to appeal to and energize moderate voters will help him in the rest of the country.

Our campaign will capitalize on these election and calendar strengths by appealing to women and voters of color. We will appeal to women through advertising Sununu’s moderate stances on social issues because women are more liberal than men in aggregate. We will appeal to voters of color by simply not antagonizing them. Our class has discussed how voters of color are often socially conservative, but feel alienated by the Republican Party’s refusal to denounce its racist members. By showing how Sununu can be conservative without the racial resentment found in many other candidates, we will likely get a larger share of the non-white vote than his opponents who are less likely to denounce the racist portion of their base.

With these strategies, I believe the Sununu for President Campaign is well positioned to win the Republican primary. Once we are through to the general election, I believe our campaign will have no trouble overcoming the Democratic candidate. The Biden administration is relatively unpopular (FiveThirtyEight) and our campaign will be able to capitalize on that unpopularity and ride the moderate vote to the White House.

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