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Andrew Downs: Out of presidential spotlight

Written by

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For Hoosier political junkies, 2008 was a great year. Candidates stopped in Indiana to do more than raise money. In fact, we saw more visits from more candidates and surrogates than any other election since the 1960s. There were presidential campaign offices in the state engaged in thoughtful and purposeful campaign work. We saw campaign commercials, not just as part of news stories, but as actual advertising, and there was an abundance of national media attention lavished on the state.

Voters only familiar with the 2008 election, or those familiar with Indiana's history between the Civil War and the 1920s, might think that presidential campaigns in the state are always this exciting. The rest of us know better. From 1968 through 2004, the Republican candidate won Indiana often by very large margins. To put the Republican presidential election domination in perspective, keep in mind that in 1972, 1984, 1988 and 2004, the Republican candidate earned 60 percent or more of the two-party presidential vote. Additionally, in 2008, a very good year for Democrats, Republican John McCain earned 49.48 percent of the two-party

vote.

For a little while, there was some hope of a similarly spectacular year in 2012. However, over the weekend, Gov. Mitch Daniels dealt a death blow to the dreams of political junkies around the state when he announced that he would not run for president of the United States.

Both Daniels and Indiana have benefited from his flirtation with a run for the White House. The most obvious benefit has been the raising of Daniels' status throughout the country. Daniels now is a national figure in the debate on governmental fiscal matters and the economy.

Daniels is likely to remain a national figure, in part, because he got out of the race before he had to endure much of the scrutiny that presidential candidates usually receive. Exiting the race means that he will not have to worry about building momentum for his campaign, meeting expectations, or alienating a constituency, just to name a few of the concerns he has

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avoided. This means that the bloom still is on the Daniels rose and he could play a significant role in who gets the nomination.

His status as a potential presidential candidate also helped shine a light on the condition of Indiana. If you ask Republicans, Indiana is a shining city on a hill. If you ask Democrats, Indiana is on the edge of collapse. The reality is that Indiana is not on the top of many lists, but it also is far from the bottom of most lists. It avoided relegation to the scrap heap of states during a bad economic time that was felt hardest by manufacturing states such as Indiana. In the recent past, that was a pretty good record.

What would a Daniels run for president have done for Indiana?

It would have brought back some of the excitement we saw in 2008. Unfortunately, the reality is that the attention during an election goes to the battleground states. Having Daniels in the race likely would have taken Indiana out of the battleground category.

It also would have brought increased attention to policy initiatives passed under Daniels such as education reform. The increased scrutiny would have meant more data and analysis attempting to determine the real effect of his policy initiatives. The entire country would have benefited from that.

Almost immediately after announcing he would not run for president, it was pointed out that he did not rule out a run for vice

president. Indiana has been called the "Mother of Vice Presidents." Three Republican and two Democratic vice presidents called Indiana home. There is a big difference between running for president and running for vice president. The time on the campaign trail is much shorter for vice presidential candidates. The scrutiny is intense, but not as intense as it is for the presidential candidate. Perhaps the change in intensity will cause members of the Daniels family to waive their veto power.

It is safe to say that a small number of people know what Daniels will do when his term ends. His resume shows a commitment to serving the public. That commitment might bring to mind a quote from Indiana Gov. Ralph Gates (1945 to 1949): "The first words uttered by a Hoosier infant are: 'I am not a candidate for any office, but if nominated I will run and if elected I will serve.' "

Downs is director of the Mike Downs Center for Indiana Politics at Indiana

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