

# Birth Order Characteristics of the 2012 Presidential Candidates

By Dr. Ellen K. Rudolph

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This essay explores the birth order influences of the current roster of 2012 presidential candidates including sitting-President Barack Obama, Governor Mitt Romney, Speaker Newt Gingrich, Senator Rick Santorum, and Congressman Ron Paul. First, it will summarize the salient nuclear family influences that accompany one's birth order position and how that impacts future adult roles and behavior.

*Birth order* refers to age and sex differentials between and among siblings in a nuclear family. In turn, *nuclear family* is a term used to define a family constellation that consists of biological parents and their immediate, biological offspring.

I should note that a nuclear family in [Bowen systems](#) terms does not include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, or even stepchildren or stepsiblings. These additional family members form a wider collective known as the *extended family*. And while these extended family members exert an important influence on us, it is the dynamics of the biological nuclear family that impact us the most in terms of future adult character and role development. This is particularly the case concerning one's sibling position, or birth order as it is otherwise known, within the nuclear family.

## **A typical scenario**

Let's start with a scenario that is played out again and again in families.

A couple marries and conceives two children: this nuclear family is therefore composed of four individuals – father, mother, child A (a first-born male child) and child B (a second-born female child). This would be the same whether the couple was married at the time or became parents outside the bounds of marriage; however, for the purposes of this discussion let's assume that the couple in this scenario is married.

As fate or fortune would have it, the couple divorces in time. The mother retains custody of the couple's two biological children and the parents distance themselves from each other and marry new spouses.

The mother with children A and B then marries a man with two children of his own from a previous marriage, although his children remain in the physical custody of their biological mother.

This new marital pair forms a household with four persons, also, but with the additional non-custodial visitations of the new spouse's children from his prior marriage.

People typically refer to the children in this merged household as *stepsiblings*; meaning, each child in the household has only one biological parent present but they develop a parental relationship with the other non-biological adult/spouse and (typically) their offspring.

### **This is where things get more complicated**

From a nuclear family perspective, child A and child B from their mother's first marriage retain their absolute sibling positioning in relation to one another. Child A (a first-born male in this case) is still the oldest brother of a youngest sister. And Child B (a second-born female in this case) is still the younger sister of an older brother.

This is true regardless of the presence of any stepsiblings now present in the newly organized family unit.

If the stepparent has two boys that are 3 and 4 years older than these two biological siblings, the mother's biological children do not suddenly become younger siblings of two older male brothers. This is true no matter how many years they live together in this merged family.

Instead, they retain their original nuclear family biological positioning in relation to each other, as do the two brothers from their own original nuclear family.

In other words: the oldest (step) brother's sibling position is still that of an older brother of a younger brother; and the sibling position of the

younger (step) brother is still that of a younger brother of an older brother, neither having the influence of female siblings.

The original nuclear family arrangement, however short-lived, remains the defining factor in one's overall 'sibling position' orientation.

Now, if remarriage occurs very early on in the lives of children, and they grow to adulthood with stepsiblings, then those stepsibling relationships have somewhat of a more pronounced influence than normal. The children of the merged family unit each retain their nuclear family sibling positions and all associated characteristics, but they will have *enhanced influences* by virtue of living longer within a wider circle of immediate household members. Should those experiences be negative, the influences will also be negative.

The term *stepsibling* is a confusing one in that it causes people to assume things that are not necessarily true about their early behavioral and emotional underpinnings. Even the term stepparent can be an emotional jungle of sorts, since a child does not lose a biological parent in the process of divorce – only in the case of death does that happen. And even then they only have one genetic mother and father. Other adults in their lives can certainly take on the role of emotional *parents*.

### **More about nuclear family and sibling position influences**

People who grow up in the same sibling position tend to have important characteristics in common. For example, first-born children tend towards leadership positions in life while youngest children generally are more content to be followers. Youngest siblings tend also to be more laissez-faire while their first-born siblings tackle life with greater seriousness overall and certainly with a need for more personal control over their surroundings. This is even more pronounced in only children.

Youngest children who find themselves in leadership positions as adults will have a *leadership style* that is quite different from that of an oldest child who will tend to assert much more dominance over others by comparison.

Before we take a closer look at the 2012 presidential candidates, including President Obama, it is important to note a few more salient characteristics of sibling position that impact adult behaviors and roles.

The much-maligned *middle child* position is an interesting one. Middle children who are fairly close in age to older and younger biological siblings will take on some of the functional characteristics of two sibling positions. In the case of a middle female child with an older brother and a younger brother, she will tend to have some of the characteristics of a younger sister of an older brother, but also of an older sister of a younger brother. Developmentally, she has a broader range of sibling relationship experiences than if she were a mere youngest sister of an older brother, or *visa versa*. And this prepares her far better for the world of adult relationships.

That said, additional complications characterize this scenario. If her older brother is just a year or two older, but there are 5 or 6 years or more in age between herself and her youngest brother – then this nuclear family actually has two sibling groups, one of which is more influential than the other. The first grouping is that of an older brother with a close-in-age younger sister. This is the most impactful sibling relationship. The second grouping is that of a quasi-only youngest male child. By *quasi-only* I mean this: such a sibling is reared more as an only child even though he has older biological siblings. When they are teenagers he is still in his childhood years, with childhood friends and activities that are quite different in character from theirs. In addition, by the time the youngest male child comes along his parents are in quite a different place in their marriage and so the parental relationship established between parents and the youngest child will be significantly different. In some cases it will be totally different.

The emotional influences in this regard can be good or bad. Assuming the nuclear family unit is moderately stable, the quasi-only child (of the youngest sort) will admire and love his more distant older siblings but he will not be that impacted by them; and he will also be much more self-directed and probably more self-secure than them. He will approach life more as an *only child* even though technically he is not an only child.

I use the term “of the youngest sort” deliberately.

This quasi-only position is generally more benign and self-preserving than is the case of a quasi-only child “of the oldest sort.” In the *oldest sort* case – again, this is when there are 5 or 6 years or more between a child and his or her nearest biological sibling – that oldest quasi-only child is more typically the product of marital discord. Perhaps it was discord stemming from an unplanned pregnancy that effectively forced the marriage into being. Perhaps it was discord stemming from too early a marriage between young, immature spouses. In either case, this child becomes engulfed in marital anxieties over time that can trigger significant emotional upheaval in the child who forever after stands in that family as a symbol of a troubled marriage.

That child subsequently grows into adulthood with generally more anxieties in all aspects of life -- in marriage, in a chosen career or profession, indeed in any leadership roles that he may assume over time. Yet they have, in addition, all the more traditional characteristics of a true only child.

But let me add that the more negative their early life posturing was, the more negative they come across in adult interactions in the world.

### **Other sibling types**

A *true middle child* is one who has older brothers and sisters and younger brothers and sisters. Their experiences growing up include significant relationship histories with older and younger males and females and, in this regard, they are probably the most well-equipped to deal with the emotional vagaries of adult life and adult relationships. They are often considered the easiest kinds of adults to deal with in the workplace, regardless of their position in that system – janitor, boss, board chairman, secretary, whatever.

Age is an important factor in any traits that heavily influence us emotionally. Biological siblings close in age who grow up together are vastly more influenced by their adjacent siblings than are children whose siblings are far more dispersed in age. I remember talking with a mother once who had six children, each six years apart. She, in essence,

produced six different quasi-only children, not to mention what she did to tie herself down to more than 36 childrearing years. This family would never be characterized as a 'close' family.

In the same vein, much older parents have demonstrably less intense and more distant relationships with their children than do much younger parents who are closer in age to their children.

Similarly, a marriage between a much older man and much younger woman is also less intense and more distant on many levels than are marriages between spouses much closer in age.

### **Enter the complication of parents and *their* sibling positions**

As if things aren't already complicated enough, the sibling positions of parents also heavily influence their relationships with their children, all of whom have their own unique sibling positions.

With this subject we are entering the wider world of the *multigenerational* family that affords us a view of the extended family over two, three, and even four generations or more.

#### **EXAMPLE:**

John Sr. and his wife Susan marry and have four children. If the first-born child is a male he is likely named John Jr. like his father and his sibling position is that of a first-born male of younger siblings. If he has three younger *brothers* than he is a first-born male of three younger brothers, which makes him quite different emotionally than if he had three younger *sisters*, or two younger sisters and a brother.

The sex of biological siblings is just as important as their age in determining one's unique sibling position traits.

For argument, let's say that John Sr. is the first-born male of his family (a generation back) that produced all younger female children after him. And his wife, Susan, is the youngest child of six or more *older* siblings, most of them female. The first-born child in her nuclear family is a dysfunctional male who created years of familial discord in his wake. She (Susan) looks askance at first-born males (except her husband, of

course) because of her own experience with first-born males growing up, something that in turn causes her to behave differentially towards her own first-born son, John Jr. There are lots of endings to this scenario, but a common one is for John Jr's parents to have abiding disagreements over that son's stature in life. In the eyes of one parent he stands proud and tall, in the eyes of the other parent he is a weakling not to be trusted, etc.

This example marriage, therefore, is made up of (A) a *dominant first-born male* who proudly produces a first-born son, with the rest of his children being less consequential to him emotionally since they are female (because he is not used to females other than his *mother*). And (B) a *youngest female* with pronounced female attributes emotionally (because of her many sister siblings).

John Jr. will relate much better to his father and, in turn, the three younger female siblings will relate better to their mother. Without going into more detail I will say that the marriage of John Sr. and Susan will also suffer down the road because of their basic attitudes about the sibling roles of their children, particularly that of their first-born son.

The more closely our own sibling position matches that of one or other parent, the more impact that position will have in determining our emotional role and behavior as an adult.

A last-born female with 5 older brothers is quite a different person emotionally than a first-born female with 5 younger brothers. Her approach to life, as well as her approach to intimate relationships, will be impacted by these sibling experiences. And they will be better or worse for it depending upon the additional unique mix of females to males in both of her parents' families of origin.

It should be noted that some families even prize male children over female children, not only in this culture but in others around the world – and for a variety of reasons.

Also, some marriages more than others are complementary, meaning; two first-born spouses are not nearly so compatible emotionally as a first-born male (with a beloved youngest sister) married to a youngest

female of older beloved brothers. Their sibling relationships in this case will very clearly enhance the marital relationship.

It goes without saying that a younger male child who grows up with a “wicked witch” of a first born sister will constantly be on the lookout in life for any more such “wicked witches.” And he will be severely problemated by them. And a first-born female whose endowed role in the nuclear family was to be the surrogate mother of her younger siblings will forever be forging a motherly role towards others in life, with both good and sometimes not so good consequences.

### **In summary**

The ensuing emotional relationships between the sexes in a family are just as important as the sexes of siblings *and* the age differences between siblings; all of which is compounded by similar kinds of dynamics that ensued in previous generations of family.

One important conclusion that can be drawn about birth order, then, is that there are *differing intensities* of birth order experiences.

A family of all brothers has a different relationship intensity about them than a family of all sisters. In the same way, a marriage between a man with 5 brothers and a woman with only sisters has a very different intensity and affect than a marriage between a man and woman with fairly compatible mixed-sex sibling experiences between them.

It is not uncommon for women from a *sisterly* background to have intimacy woes with their husbands, in the same way that women with all male siblings often have trouble treating their husbands as something other than just another brother.

We can say with certainty that nuclear family sibling relationships are important forerunners to more intimate relationships like marriage, and even including corporate or political relationships that are built around power and money. Such sibling dynamics are predicative of a person’s overall approach to others and their relationship successes (or failures) therein.



Board room dynamics within powerful corporations, physician relationships in hospital settings, teacher-student relationships in universities, voter responses to political candidates – all of these things and more are affected by one’s own birth order dynamics and that of the public personas with whom we interact in the world around us.

## **Now to the fun stuff**

### CANDIDATE A

**Sitting-President Barack Obama** is a true **ONLY CHILD**. Yes, he has numerous *stepsibling* relationships as a result of his biological parents’ multiple liaisons. In fact, records show that he has a total of ten half-siblings from his mother’s two marriages, from his father’s four marriages, and another two from his former stepfather’s marriages.

Nevertheless, Barack Obama is an only child because none of these stepsiblings share his same exact biological parents. The diversity of his extended family is remarkable yet he bears all the typical characteristics of a person raised by emotionally distant parents in distant lands, where he was essentially raised as an only child in a largely adult world. Because he is a sitting President, it is easy to find examples of his *only child* approach to life, not the least of them being his rush to work around Congress and ‘take charge’ even if it skirts the U.S. Constitution in the process.

My clinical rule for only children is this: the *smaller* the system the only child manages the better, because of the lack of interactive sibling experiences. This is compounded by any lack therein of emotional support given the child by the parents.

An only child leader can cause significant emotional turmoil in larger systems – such as a university, or a Congress – where comfortable interactivity is a primary requirement of the job.

### CANDIDATE B

Another **ONLY CHILD** in the candidate lineup is **Speaker Newt Gingrich**. He was born in 1943 in south central Pennsylvania to a 16-year old mother whose forced marriage fell apart within days. Three years later his mother married Army officer Robert Gingrich who subsequently adopted Newt who, as a result, has three younger stepsisters. These are three females who were subsequently born to his mother and Robert Gingrich, and they do not share the Speaker's biological parents.

Like other only child personalities that move in powerful circles, Speaker Gingrich's clear and compelling tendency is to 'take charge' but without the interactive experiences from formative years to soften and enrich those take-charge relationships. He has as public record of pushing things through the House of Representatives, and of arm-twisting and high-level lobbying, even womanizing, all being the kinds of things that are typical of an individual whose expertise and experience is in being the life-long *captain of the ship*, but hardly a subordinate.

What we don't have about this candidate is any multigenerational information related to his biological parents and their own sibling constellations. Such information is necessary to know the full extent to which he is driven to act Presidentially as a lone wolf.

#### CANDIDATE C

**Governor Mitt Romney** is a **QUASI-ONLY CHILD OF THE YOUNGEST SORT**. This means he is the youngest child in a family with two older sisters and a brother – a sibling lineup that Mr. Romney followed after a gap of six years.

While he has the interactive experience associated with mixed sex but *distant* siblings, we don't have much information in the public record about the quality of his siblings' or his parents' lives. His first-born sister was born in 1935, followed by another sister in 1938, which was followed by his only brother's birth in 1941. Mitt was born in 1947.

We do know his father was an automobile executive and had been born into a Mormon colony in Mexico to American parents. That tells us something about the depth of Mr. Romney's generational underpinnings, his being a fifth-generation member of The Church of Latter-day Saints. And a great-great-grandfather of his was an early leader in the church during the same time. The Mormon religion is clearly of great importance in this man's life.

In terms of leadership capability, Candidate Romney is still an **ONLY CHILD** with all the characteristics of leadership that that implies. He certainly should be expected to work a bit more benignly alongside both men and women in Congress and in a Romney White House, assuming his early sibling relationships themselves were benign. Should those turn out not to be so benign, as can sometimes be the case in male-dominating Mormon family constellations, then that should become ever more clear as the race to 2012 continues.

#### CANDIDATE D

**Senator Rick Santorum** is a puzzle. He is a **MIDDLE CHILD** with one older sister and one young brother, the ages of which I have not been able to ascertain.

We do know that the Senator is 53 years old, born of a clinical psychologist father and a nurse mother. And we know that both of his parents worked in the VA Hospital system. He is the middle of the three children of Aldo Santorum, an Italian immigrant and clinical psychologist who immigrated to the United States at the age of seven. His father was 35 when the Senator was born, and his Italian/Irish mother was closer to 40 at the time that she gave birth to him. She was born in 1918 and appeared recently with him on television at the age of 93.

The only thing I could find that is repeated constantly in any public records about his early life is this: "Santorum was the middle child of his family, with a fiercely private older sister and a young brother (Dan Santorum)." This is an exact quote that I found over and over again in documentary web sites about Senator Santorum. That's it.

But a ‘fiercely private older sister’ could mean a lot of things, including being much older and quite distant or inaccessible, or even having something to hide from public view. We just don’t know. We also don’t know the age of his younger brother, therefore we lack critical information of a predictive nature about his inherent relationship capabilities as a leader.

Lacking real personal data of this sort, we can only surmise what went on behind the scenes of his growing up years and, in such cases, more current information takes on even more importance. He met his wife, Karen, while she was a law student and he was recruiting summer interns for the Kirkpatrick & Lockhart Law firm. Karen had their eighth child (Isabella) in 2008 at the age of 48. This child was shortly thereafter diagnosed with Trisomy 18 Edwards syndrome, a serious genetic disorder that is causally associated with the advanced age of the mother. The Senator is well-known in Washington for his hardcore stance against homosexual rights, and for his work to counter the threat of what he calls *radical Islam*. His wife, Karen, home-schools their seven surviving children.

It is written that the Senator was nicknamed “Rooster” during his public school years, both for a cowlick he possessed and for his *defiantly confrontational* nature. That phrase alone might contain some important hints about his inherent leadership capabilities. In the final analysis, we just don’t know enough about this man who wants to be President.

## CANDIDATE E

Candidate **Ron Paul** was born in 1935 in western Pennsylvania as the **THIRD OF FIVE SONS** of Howard and Margaret Paul, and was brought up with the ethic that “you worked six days a week and went to church on the seventh.” His first job at the age of 5 was to watch his uncle wash bottles and put them on a conveyer belt at his father’s small dairy, which he then inspected for spots. He got a penny for every dirty bottle that he found. He also had a paper route, mowed lawns and worked in

the local drug store in his youth, and also worked part-time as a painter and furniture maker.

His paternal great-grandparents emigrated from Germany, and his mother was of German and Irish ancestry. Both of his parents were born in the United States.

Of his four brothers, David Paul and another of the brothers entered the ministry, his brother Wayne is a CPA, and another brother is a math professor. Congressman Ron Paul, a medical doctor, is an expert in the Austrian School of Economics and a foremost critic of the Federal Reserve and U.S. monetary policy. He is also a staunch supporter of personal liberty and the protections afforded citizens by the Constitution.

Congressman Paul and his wife, Carol Wells, have five children, one of which (Rand Paul) was newly elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010.

From a sibling perspective, Congressman Paul has a significant interactive history, although with brothers exclusively. This makes him less prepared to deal in political circles with both men *and women* in power. The close brotherly influences, along with his stint as a flight surgeon in the US Air Force (1963-65) and in the US Air National Guard (1965-68), were probably influential in the formation of his anti-war stand that has consistently characterized his Congressional posturing.

## **ADDENDUM**

The more we know about the family backgrounds of public officials, especially the sibling relationship dynamics that engulfed them in their formative years, the better we can predict their behaviors as leaders.

This kind of information is sorely lacking in the public domain, cloaked as it often is in privacy considerations. However, it is the very information that is most telling about persons that the American electorate is scrutinizing as candidates for the highest office in the land.

Our character, above all else, is formed by the biological family relationships that we are born into. The closer, and the more interactive and nurturing those relationships were back then, the more character-driven are our behaviors as leaders in today's complex world.

Nurturance begets nurturance.

I offer these observations to help concerned voters make more astute choices in the upcoming 2012 federal elections.

#### CREDITS

Dr. Ellen K. Rudolph is an experienced family theorist and family coach, and long-time student of Dr. Murray Bowen's theory of family emotional functioning. She spent more than 20 years in the community mental health system in VA followed by a successful private outpatient practice. She is also an international photojournalist, author, and public speaker. You can explore her [essay blog](#) that showcases her wide-ranging essays on conservation, education, the environment, the family, the art of photography, and the psychology of politics. Contact her by [email](#).