

Iowa straw poll: the decadence of American politics on display

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Even by the decadent standards of American politics, the August 14 straw poll in Iowa marked a new low. Rival candidates for the Republican presidential nomination clashed in a vote-buying contest, lavishing enormous sums to bribe a few thousand party loyalists and hangers-on, while the media collaborated by inflating the significance of the contest and treating it with utmost seriousness.

The poll was won by Texas Governor George W. Bush, son of the former president, but it was a test, not of popular political support, but of financial resources. The two top spenders on the straw poll, Bush and publishing multi-millionaire Steve Forbes, came in first and second.

While Bush aides hailed the straw poll as a “festival of democracy,” the event had no democratic content. A total of 25,000 people cast ballots during the day-long event at the campus of Iowa State University in Ames, out of a statewide population of nearly three million.

The vote-buying was literal, not figurative. Participants had to pay \$25 to vote, but the candidates distributed prepaid tickets, provided free transportation to Ames—every bus in Iowa was chartered by one campaign or another—and spent lavishly to feed and entertain prospective supporters.

Forbes paid for a full-scale air-conditioned mini-carnival, with rides and a play center for children, while Bush laid out \$63,000 to erect his tent closest to the hall where the balloting took place. Singers and other celebrities were on hand, procured by various candidates. Forbes had Debbie Boone and Ronnie Millsap, Senator Orrin Hatch had Vic Damone and basketball star Karl Malone, Bush a bevy of country singers, fundamentalist Gary Bauer featured Gospel music.

Bush spent \$825,000 in a six-week effort to win the

straw poll, more than \$100 for each of the 7,418 votes he received. Forbes spent more than \$2 million, about \$400 for each of his 4,921 votes, including \$1 million for television ads which blanketed the rural state, one of them a half-hour infomercial shown the night before the straw poll. In all, an estimated \$7 million was spent by the nine candidates.

While Bush has raised a record \$37 million for his campaign for the presidential nomination, Forbes, with a personal wealth estimated at \$550 million, has access to even greater resources. During the first six months of 1999 Forbes outspent Bush, \$8.1 million to \$7.2 million. One Bush adviser, trying to explain Bush's relatively unimpressive victory in the straw poll, told the *New York Times*: “There was one thing we couldn't control: how many votes Mr. Forbes could buy.”

Inasmuch as the Democratic and Republican parties are political organizations committed to the defense of the wealthy but seeking to attract the votes of working class and middle class people, the essential function of all modern American election campaigns is to lie and distort reality. The speeches by the candidates at Ames were a particularly exaggerated example of this, verging on the bizarre.

Bush, who has overseen the execution of nearly 100 people during his five years in office—including four in the runup to the straw poll—repeated his standard stump speech about “compassionate conservatism.” Forbes, the pampered son of a magazine billionaire, presented himself as the populist defender of ordinary people, calling for a “flat tax” (which would free the wealthy by abolishing inheritance taxes and the graduated income tax). Dan Quayle, the former vice president, US Senator and congressman, denounced the Washington establishment and presented himself as an “outsider.” Alan Keyes, the lone black candidate, denounced the

income tax as “worse than slavery.” Patrick Buchanan suggested that if elected, his first action as president would be to order the arrest of Bill Clinton.

In previous presidential campaigns, the Iowa straw poll has generally been derided as a meaningless affair which could easily be rigged by a candidate willing to expend enough money and effort to do so. Fundamentalist TV evangelist Pat Robertson won the straw poll in 1987, while Texas Senator Phil Gramm tied with Bob Dole in 1995.

But this year the American media by and large presented the straw poll as a significant political event which provided a genuine means of measuring the strength of the rival candidates. An army of 400 journalists, one for every 60 people who voted, covered the day's events in Ames—more journalists than some Republican candidates received votes.

A column in the *New York Times* by Gail Collins gushed, “The memorable thing about the Iowa straw poll was not the fact that George Bush won it, but the spectacle of so many average people actually enjoying themselves at a political event.” The *Wall Street Journal* was even more enthusiastic. Its editorial declared, “For cynics who say a straw poll isn't a real election, we only wish you could have been there.”

Far from being “average people,” the bulk of those who attended the straw poll were drawn from the most reactionary social layers. Candidates vying for the support of the Christian Coalition and other extreme right elements—Forbes, Quayle, Buchanan, Keyes and Bauer—collected more than 40 percent of the vote.

The Republican presidential field is itself a demonstration of the increasingly narrow social base of the Republican Party and of big business politics as a whole. Four of the top five candidates at the Ames straw poll—Forbes, Elizabeth Dole, Bauer and Buchanan—have never been elected to any political office. But they possess the necessary “qualifications”—money, close ties to the extreme right, or both. Of the top eight Republicans at Ames only Bush has won an election at any level in the last ten years.

Former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, who folded his campaign after finishing sixth in the straw poll, observed bitterly that the Republican presidential nomination “should not be inherited.” The top three Republicans at the straw poll, however, were the son of

the former president, the son of a billionaire, and the wife of the former presidential candidate. (Similarly, the Democratic frontrunner, Vice President Al Gore, is the son of a US Senator.)

These facts are well known, but largely taken for granted by the media, which regards the domination of American politics by a wealthy financial oligarchy as perfectly natural. The same elite, of course, controls the media. But the gulf between the political system, with its two virtually identical big business parties, and the vast majority of working people has never been greater.



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