

New Hampshire primary vote shakes up US presidential campaign

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The February 2 New Hampshire presidential primary has thrown the contest for the Republican Party nomination into turmoil, with the victory of Arizona Senator John McCain over the consensus choice of the party establishment for the nomination, Texas Governor George W. Bush.

Despite spending millions in New Hampshire and outdoing McCain in both campaign advertising and door-to-door organization, Bush finished a poor second, winning only 31 percent of the vote compared to 49 percent for McCain. Just last summer Bush enjoyed a lead in the opinion polls of 61 percent to 3 percent over the senator.

In the wake of New Hampshire the McCain campaign has received a boost from favorable media coverage. It has taken in a flood of campaign contributions, nearly \$1 million in three days, mostly in relatively small amounts collected on McCain's Internet web site. Pollsters in the next Republican primary state, South Carolina, reported that McCain had made up a 20-point gap and was running even or ahead of Bush, two weeks before the February 19 vote.

The presidential nomination process, like all political events which take place in the constricted framework of the US two-party system, is only a very distorted reflection of popular sentiments. Media manipulation and the lack of any political alternative to the two big business parties play an enormous role. McCain's effort to portray himself as a Washington "outsider," opponent of "special interests" and champion of political reform is hardly compatible with his record as a reliable defender of corporate interests. But there is no question that the vote in New Hampshire genuinely shocked the Bush campaign, the Republican Party leadership in Congress, and the media pundits who had effectively conceded the nomination to Bush for nearly a year.

Bush has the support of at least 35 of the 55 Republican senators, nearly every Republican state governor, and the bulk of the Republican majority in the House of Representatives. He raised an unprecedented \$69 million during 1999, allowing him to forego federal subsidies and spending limits and spend essentially unlimited amounts during the primary campaign. He was the runaway leader in national opinion polls and won easily in the Iowa caucuses, where party connections and money played the decisive role. But none of this brought victory in New Hampshire.

McCain sought to capitalize on the growing public disillusionment and disaffection with the US political system, posturing as a maverick who was opposed to both the Republican

and Democratic Party establishments and the control of official Washington by powerful moneyed interests. Last fall he won notoriety with the public declaration that in Washington "we're all corrupt," because of the blatant influence-peddling by lobbyists. The centerpiece of his candidacy has been proposed campaign finance reform legislation, which would ban large contributions by corporations and labor unions to the Republican and Democratic parties (so-called soft money donations).

The Arizona senator openly sought the votes of independents—those choosing not to register as either Democrats or Republicans, who now make up the largest proportion of voters in New Hampshire. Tens of thousands did so, raising turnout in the primary to nearly 50 percent of registered voters, the highest in the state's history. McCain led Bush by 3-1 among registered independents who voted in the Republican primary.

Significantly, McCain has been the only candidate in either party to raise, even in the most limited way, the issue of deepening economic inequality. He criticized Bush's tax plan by declaring that "sixty percent of the benefits from Bush's tax cuts go to the wealthiest ten percent of Americans," adding, "I'm not giving tax cuts for the rich." Bush aides responded by accusing McCain of advocating "class warfare."

All the more stunning to most party leaders was McCain's lead in New Hampshire among registered Republicans, and even among voters describing themselves as "conservative." He trailed Bush only among Republican voters describing themselves as "very conservative" or Christian fundamentalists.

In the last week of the campaign, Bush was supposedly buoyed by his victory in the Iowa caucuses and by campaign appearances on his behalf by former New Hampshire Governor John Sununu, and by his parents, George and Barbara Bush, as well as a massive advertising blitz. But he suffered the biggest loss in a contested New Hampshire primary since his father was swamped by Ronald Reagan in 1980. The *Washington Post* noted: "Bush's lackluster performance represented the worst defeat suffered by a front-runner of either party in the modern history of the New Hampshire primary."

The New Hampshire vote showed that neither tax-cutting nor opposition to abortion, two mainstays of Republican politics at the height of the party's ascendancy, roused the anticipated levels of popular support. Bush and billionaire publishing heir Steve Forbes both sought to make taxes the main issue in the Republican primary, but their combined vote was less than McCain's. The

three candidates advocating most openly the agenda of the Christian fundamentalists saw their proportion of the vote slump from 54 percent in the Iowa caucuses to barely 20 percent in New Hampshire, the poorest showing in a major Republican contest in the two decades since the Christian right became a significant power in the Republican Party. Forbes won only 14 percent of the vote, anti-abortion campaigner Alan Keyes 5 percent, and fundamentalist Gary Bauer only 1 percent, a result which led him to end his campaign.

On the Democratic side, Vice President Al Gore won a relatively narrow victory over former Senator Bill Bradley, 52 percent to 47 percent, but the setback for Bradley was rather larger than the margin of the vote. He had led in polls in New Hampshire throughout the fall, but lost the state despite spending more on advertising and enjoying considerable media support. There will be no further Democratic primary contests for six weeks, when 15 states hold elections March 7, including California, New York, Ohio, Missouri and the five New England states.

While Bradley and McCain have run similar campaigns as “insurgents” against the party establishment, and even held an unusual joint appearance in New Hampshire to promote campaign finance reform legislation, the liberal Bradley has been more reluctant than the conservative McCain to make an appeal on the basis of economic populism. In the end Bradley led Gore in only two social groups, families with annual incomes over \$100,000 and college-age youth, and he lost heavily among union members and lower-income and working-class voters generally.

There is more than a little hypocrisy in McCain's supposed crusade against political corruption. He was one of five senators linked to convicted savings and loan swindler Charles Keating, and he has close relations with a wide range of corporate interests, especially the telecommunications industry, in his role as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee. The leading corporate sponsors of his political career include US West, AT&T, BellSouth, Motorola, Viacom, Boeing, Bank of America and Phelps Dodge, which smashed a bitter 1983 strike by copper miners in Arizona the year after McCain entered Congress.

The Arizona senator was only in a position to interrupt, at least for the time being, the virtual coronation of former President George Bush's son because of his backing from a significant section of big business. While other Bush rivals—Lamar Alexander, Elizabeth Dole, Dan Quayle—were dropping out of the race last year, unable to raise enough money to compete, McCain raised more than \$14 million, despite his low showing in the polls and his decision to skip the first contest, the Iowa caucuses.

Despite his populist sallies against the incestuous relations between Washington and Wall Street, McCain remains a thoroughly reactionary political figure. Son and grandson of admirals, the former Vietnam War POW was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1982 and succeeded Barry Goldwater, the one-time standard bearer of the Republican right, in the US Senate. He has a standard right-wing political resume during his 18 years in Congress, opposing minimum wage legislation while backing deregulation bills and many of the corporate tax breaks which he now calls for abolishing.

McCain immediately set the tone for the next stage in his

campaign, in South Carolina, with a series of appearances in that state in which he emphasized his right-wing credentials and appealed for the support of independents and conservative Democrats, who can vote in the Republican primary because the South Carolina Democrats are holding caucuses on a different date. He said that his goal was to follow the example of Reagan “to expand the base of the party and continue to espouse the conservative philosophy.”

Two of McCain's top backers in South Carolina are worth noting: one is Congressman Lindsey Graham, one of the 12 House managers in the impeachment of Clinton, and one of the most aggressive prosecutors in the Senate trial. (McCain, like all but five Republican senators, voted to remove Clinton from office).

The other McCain supporter is Richard Quinn, a longtime right-wing Republican strategist and the editor of *Southern Partisan* magazine, an organ of racist and anti-immigrant filth which has praised former Klan leader David Duke as “a Populist spokesperson for a recapturing of the American ideal.” Patrick Buchanan is one of the magazine's two senior advisers.

When the question of South Carolina's continued flying of the Confederate flag over the state capitol was first raised as an issue in the presidential campaign, McCain conceded that the flag was a “symbol of racism and slavery.” He quickly reversed himself, pronouncing the issue a matter for South Carolina to decide, and calling the flag a “symbol of heritage.”

While McCain moves to the right in South Carolina, George W. Bush is determined not to be outflanked. His campaign has issued a barrage of statements condemning McCain's views as “liberal” and even “leftist,” while Bush declared at a press conference Wednesday, “I am the right. I am the conservative candidate.”

Bush's first South Carolina rally was before 5,000 students at Bob Jones University, the fundamentalist college which lost its tax exemption in the 1970s because of blatant racial discrimination, including a ban on interracial dating. Later in the day the Bush campaign unveiled his endorsement for the Republican nomination by former Vice President Dan Quayle, who called Bush the candidate of “family values.”

The *New York Times* reported a mood of consternation at Bush headquarters, with fundraisers flooded with phone calls from worried donors who are now contemplating hedging their bets by supplying cash to McCain.



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