

Bush debacle in Michigan primary election deepens crisis in Republican Party

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The upset of the Republicans' supposed presidential frontrunner, Texas Governor George W. Bush, in the February 22 Michigan primary election has intensified the crisis of the Republican Party and prolonged the contest between Bush and his opponent for the party's nomination, Arizona Senator John McCain. Despite a huge financial war chest and all-out support from the Republican Party establishment, Bush suffered a humiliating defeat.

McCain won a substantial victory, 51 percent to 43 percent, in Michigan, the first major industrial state to hold a presidential primary, and swept 52 of the 58 delegates selected for the Republican nominating convention to be held in July in Philadelphia. He also carried his home state of Arizona on the same day, by nearly a 25-point margin, winning all 30 delegates at stake.

These victories more than offset the February 19 primary in South Carolina, where Bush prevailed, 53 percent to 42 percent, with heavy backing from Christian fundamentalists and the state party leadership, which is headed by 100-year-old US Senator and former segregationist Strom Thurmond. Over 1.2 million votes were cast in the Michigan primary, twice the vote total in South Carolina and more than in all the earlier primaries and caucuses combined.

After the first month of the presidential nomination campaign, Bush and McCain have carried three states apiece. McCain has netted 95 delegates to Bush's 57, according to a tally published by the *New York Times*. A total of 1,035 delegates is required for nomination.

Given that Bush has already spent over \$50 million, more than any presidential candidate in history, and has enjoyed the near-unanimous support of Republican elected officials, such a result is something of a debacle.

The two candidates now head into a stretch of 27 primaries and caucuses over the next 21 days, which could either decide the contest or open the way to a more protracted campaign, threatening a deadlocked convention and the possibility of a fracturing of the Republican Party. Bush has squandered his huge financial lead, reporting only \$16 million in campaign funds on hand, compared to McCain's \$9 million, and there has been a trickle of Republican officials, including San Diego Mayor Susan Golding and California Secretary of State Bill Jones, switching sides to endorse McCain.

The turnout in Michigan, 32 percent of the electorate, was a record for the state and triple the proportion who voted in the 1996

Republican primary. The result was a humiliation not only for Bush, who spent heavily on media attacks on McCain, but of Republican Governor John Engler, who boasted that Michigan would serve as a "firewall" for the Bush campaign. In a state where the Republicans control both houses of the state legislature as well as the governor's mansion and state Supreme Court, McCain was endorsed by only one Republican state legislator.

The vote was also a significant defeat for the religious fundamentalist and ultra-right elements who have become the mainstay of the Bush campaign since the emergence of McCain as his principal challenger. Michigan Right-to-Life mailed out hundreds of thousands of pieces of anti-McCain literature, although the Arizona senator's reactionary position on abortion—he would ban it except in cases of rape, incest or threat to the life of the mother—is identical to that of Bush.

TV evangelist and multi-millionaire Pat Robertson paid for 400,000 phone calls to Michigan voters in which his recorded voice smeared McCain's campaign co-chairman, former Republican Senator Warren Rudman, as "a vicious bigot." In the peculiarly inverted logic of the ultra-right, Robertson cited as anti-Christian prejudice comments by Rudman in a 1995 book, in which he noted, with perfect accuracy, that some Christian fundamentalists are narrow-minded bigots. Robertson's intervention was a thinly disguised attempt to whip up anti-Semitism—Rudman is Jewish—and created a backlash in Michigan.

In response, the McCain campaign paid for phone calls to Catholic voters in Michigan reminding them of Bush's appearance during the South Carolina campaign at Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist college which bans interracial dating and characterizes Catholicism as a "cult" and the Pope as a quasi-Satanic figure. Bush made the campus one of his first stops after his defeat in the February 1 New Hampshire primary, in a calculated bid to rally extreme right elements in South Carolina and find a base of support for his badly damaged campaign.

The Michigan vote is only the latest in a series of events which demonstrate the growing gulf between the ruling class elite which dominates the two big business parties and the sentiments of the broad masses of the American people. The techniques of media manipulation and political distortion, employed for decades to cover up the social chasm in America between the wealthy and everyone else, are becoming less and less effective.

This disjuncture was clearly evident during the year-long political crisis over Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky,

culminating in his impeachment and Senate trial. While there was a consensus in official Washington and among the media pundits that Clinton would be removed from office, public opinion remained overwhelmingly opposed to the quasi-legal political coup attempt, engineered by extreme-right elements in the Republican Party and the judiciary, which would have overturned the results of two presidential elections. The results of the 1998 congressional elections, in which the Republicans nearly lost control of the House of Representatives only weeks after initiating impeachment proceedings, came as a surprise to the political establishment of both parties.

The gross miscalculation of the popular reaction to the media-driven campaign over the Lewinsky affair has now been followed by a misreading of public opinion in the presidential election campaign. The Republican Party establishment settled early on George W. Bush as its choice for the party's presidential nomination. He was endorsed by every Republican state governor and the vast majority of Republican senators and congressmen, and amassed a record campaign bankroll of over \$70 million. Bush was crowned by the media as the consensus Republican nominee more than a year before the nominating convention, and half of his challengers quit the race before any votes were cast, since they were unable to raise sufficient funds to oppose him.

Bush adopted the label of "compassionate conservative," posing for photos before minority audiences and presenting himself as less strident and confrontational than the Republican congressional leaders who spearheaded the impeachment and trial of Clinton. The expectation was that his main opposition for the Republican nomination would emerge from the far right, possibly from the self-financed campaign of magazine billionaire Steve Forbes. But none of the candidates closely linked to the Christian fundamentalists attracted popular support, and in the wake of New Hampshire, Forbes abruptly quit the race.

The irony is that after spending millions of advertising dollars to give himself a public image as a candidate who could attract support from outside the hard-core right wing, who advocated a "politics of inclusion," Bush has now become the practitioner of a policy of mobilizing the ultra-right and seeking to exclude many of McCain's supporters from the primary process altogether.

After the Michigan vote, Bush was visibly shaken and embittered, blaming his defeat on the fact that Democrats could vote in the Republican primary, under Michigan's open primary system, and presenting McCain's victory as an illegitimate act of political piracy. In Los Angeles, Bush told reporters, "I lost the liberal Democrat vote of people who came into our primary to hijack our election and then go back to Al Gore in November."

According to exit polls, self-identified Republicans made up only a minority of those voting in the Michigan primary, with self-identified Democrats and independents outnumbering them 51 percent to 49 percent. Bush won the votes of two-thirds of professed Republicans, but McCain won by an even wider margin among non-Republicans.

The *Detroit News*, a conservative newspaper closely aligned with the Engler administration, reported that exit polls showed Bush slightly ahead in the voting until the afternoon shift change at auto plants around Detroit released thousands of union workers

who went to the polls and swung the result to McCain. Union households comprised one third of the Republican primary vote and favored McCain by two to one.

Despite claims that McCain's victory was the result of tactical voting by Democrats seeking to defeat Bush, there was an extremely low turnout in areas of the state, such as the city of Detroit, which are heavily working class and hostile to the Engler administration in Lansing. In traditionally Republican Oakland County, in the suburbs of Detroit, McCain led Bush by 22 percent. McCain also led Bush among every income group statewide, except those making more than \$100,000 a year.

Those voting in the Republican primary represent, for the most part, conservative sections of the middle class and the more privileged or backward workers. But even among these layers, mesmerized by the stock market boom and susceptible to right-wing nostrums such as tax-cutting and welfare-bashing, the influence of the extreme right is beginning to wane.

The vast majority of working people have become increasingly disillusioned with both parties, neither of which address their real concerns. McCain himself is no exception. He appeals to popular hostility to the corporate domination of American life and the venality of the two-party system, through his calls for campaign finance reform. But McCain is careful to keep this populist-type appeal extremely vague and formless, avoiding as much as possible any discussion of the growing social and economic polarization in America.

From the standpoint of his policies, McCain is a conventional politician of the far right who declares himself a fervent follower of Ronald Reagan. He has voted against every increase in the minimum wage proposed during his 17 years in Congress. During his two days of campaigning in Michigan, his main criticism of Bush—besides denouncing his opponent's smear tactics in South Carolina—was that the Texas governor had increased state spending more rapidly than the federal government during the same period. According to McCain, this made Bush a "big spender" and closet liberal.



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