

Contest for US presidential nominations ends with March 7 primaries

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The contest for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations has come to a sudden end following the victories of Al Gore and George W. Bush in the March 7 primaries and caucuses. The vice president's only challenger, former Senator Bill Bradley, announced Thursday he was quitting the race and would support Gore to succeed Bill Clinton. An hour later, Senator John McCain announced he was suspending his own campaign, although he pointedly left open the question of an eventual endorsement of Bush.

The withdrawal of Bradley and McCain means that Gore and Bush, the two candidates long favored by their respective party establishments, have won the nominations after only five weeks of state primaries and caucuses. This is the earliest conclusion to the nominating campaign since the present system of primary elections developed in the 1950s.

That the nominees of each party would be determined by early March has been widely expected for the past year, because the revamped primary election calendar meant that nearly half of all convention delegates would be chosen by then, the bulk of them in the "Super Tuesday" contests of March 7. On that day 16 separate state primaries and caucuses were held, including California and New York, the first and third largest states.

By moving many of the big-state primaries forward in the calendar, and scheduling so many on the same date—essentially forcing candidates to wage a costly nationwide campaign—Democratic and Republican Party officials insured that only those candidates who had widespread support in official Washington and could raise vast sums of money in a short period of time would be able to compete.

In the case of Texas Governor George W. Bush, who took in a record \$70 million in 1999, this massive fundraising proved to be the decisive edge. Bush needed every dollar, and then some, to stave off the challenge from McCain. The Bush campaign was so short of funds by the time of Super Tuesday that two longtime multi-millionaire backers of the Bush family, Sam and Charles Wyly, stepped into the breach

by purchasing \$2.5 million in ads bashing McCain in New York and California, in the name of a fictitious organization called "Republicans for the Environment."

Gore relied on institutional rather than financial supremacy to defeat Bradley easily. Backed by Democratic Party officeholders, the trade union bureaucracy and the Clinton administration, he carried every primary and caucus, although Bradley outspent him in every state where delegates were contested. The two Democrats spent over \$25 million apiece on the campaign, barely a third of Bush's outlay and well below the \$38 million raised and spent by McCain. When the spending by nominally non-party groups like the Christian Coalition and the AFL-CIO is added in, a record \$250 million has already been expended on the presidential contest, eight months before election day.

The abrupt end of the nomination struggle is itself a demonstration of the extremely limited and constricted character of American democracy. Although the official campaign has lasted only five weeks, it revealed the narrow base and deepening crisis of both the Democratic and Republican parties.

McCain's announcement that he was suspending his campaign, while not as bitter as his speech conceding defeat in the South Carolina primary February 19, contained several warnings that his eventual endorsement of the Republican ticket would be conditional and grudging, if it materialized at all. Several of his close aides were urging that he bolt from the Republican Party and seek to continue his presidential race as an independent or as the candidate of the Reform Party, and McCain did not completely rule this out in his statement.

Bush goes forward toward the general election with his pretense of "compassionate conservatism" stripped away as a result of his reliance on the Christian Coalition and other far-right and fundamentalist groups to save his candidacy. Symbolic of this relationship is the fact that television evangelist Pat Robertson, the target of McCain's attack the week before, was the first political figure interviewed by the networks March 7 after polls closed and Bush's victory was

proclaimed.

Despite Bush's victory in nine of Tuesday's thirteen contests on the Republican side, there was little enthusiasm found for the candidate in the exit polls among those participating in the primaries. A narrow majority even of Republicans described Bush as more conservative than themselves. In California nearly two thirds of those surveyed said Bush does not say what he believes—a 63-32 percent margin in favor of characterizing the Republican nominee as a hypocrite.

Nor is the state of affairs in the Democratic camp any better. Gore's sweeping victory over Bradley testifies not to an outpouring of popular support for the vice president, but rather the feebleness of Bradley's challenge and the decrepit condition of the Democratic Party as a whole. Despite enormous media publicity boosting Bradley in the initial months of the race—until the media as a whole swung behind McCain—turnout in the Democratic primaries was the lowest in any election for the last 40 years, except for the last election, when Clinton ran unopposed for renomination.

While Republican Party turnout was the highest since the Goldwater campaign of 1964—still only 13.6 percent of the voting-age population in the states which have held primaries so far—Democratic turnout fell to 10.1 percent of the voting-age population, barely ahead of the uncontested primaries of 1996. Democratic turnout in 2000 was 25 percent lower than in 1988, when Michael Dukakis defeated Jesse Jackson and Al Gore, among others.

Among the small minority who participated in the primaries, Gore won virtually by default, as Bradley made virtually no appeal to the social concerns of working people or minorities. Democratic Party voters from union households gave Gore 3-1 majorities, while black and Hispanic Democrats supported him by margins ranging from 6-1 to 8-1. Yet exit polls in New York found Democratic voters only narrowly, by 49 percent to 47 percent, affirming that Gore says what he believes.

The stage has now been set for a general election contest in which the duration and intensity of the campaign and the scale of the financial and media resources mobilized will be in inverse proportion to the actual policy differences between the two camps. Eight months of mutual mudslinging, scandal-mongering and attack ads, at an estimated cost of over \$1 billion, will help determine which of two essentially identical big business politicians succeeds Clinton in the White House.

Bush and Gore resemble each other closely, not only in their right-wing programs, but even in their social origins: both are scions of the ruling class, one the eldest son of a US president, the other the son and namesake of a US senator, both multimillionaires because of family ties to the oil

industry (Bush to the Bass brothers and other Texas tycoons, Gore to Armand Hammer and Occidental Petroleum).

The narrowness of the fall campaign (now to be a spring and summer campaign as well) is revealed in the comments of one Gore adviser, who declared that the central issues between Gore and Bush were gun control, abortion and the environment. While these issues have significance, they can hardly constitute a serious social agenda in a country where 40 million people lack health insurance, one third of all children live in poverty, and public resources are utilized to build prisons and wage war, rather than meet social needs.

On the most fundamental issue, the yawning chasm in American society between the upper layer swimming in wealth, and the vast majority of working people facing increasingly difficult conditions of life, the two big business parties have no differences. Both parties defend the interests of the top five or ten percent of the population. No Democrat or Republican even hints at a redistribution of the wealth—on the contrary, they demand that all social policies be subordinated to the market and the further enrichment of those already in the economic elite.

Despite this conformity, the two parties and the corporate-controlled media seek to reinforce the illusion that the elections provide the American people with a choice. A perverse logic seems to be at work: to the extent that the Democrats and Republicans converge towards a uniform right-wing consensus, evading any serious discussion of political or social issues, their campaigns must make up in mudslinging and demagoguery what they lack in substance.



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