

Kerry, Edwards lead in first contest of Democratic presidential campaign

Patrick Martin
21 January 2004

Monday night's caucuses in Iowa, the official beginning of the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, were won by Massachusetts senator John Kerry, who received 38 percent of the vote, with North Carolina senator John Edwards, the runner-up, receiving 32 percent. Former Vermont governor Howard Dean, the frontrunner in fundraising and national opinion polls, placed a poor third, with 18 percent of the vote. Congressman Richard Gephardt was a badly beaten fourth, at 11 percent, and pulled out of the race the next day.

In analyzing an event such as the Iowa caucuses, it is always necessary to keep in mind that the Democratic Party is one of the two main political institutions of American capitalism. It serves the interests of the financial oligarchy, and the ruling elite is deeply concerned with the selection of the candidate who may well, if circumstances warrant it, replace George Bush in the White House.

For all the attempts by the Republican Party and the media to present Bush's reelection as an inevitability, there are serious divisions within the American ruling class, and fears that the recklessness of the Bush administration, in both foreign and domestic policy, has set the stage for disaster. A debacle in Iraq or Afghanistan, or a major financial crisis at home, could lead to a rapid collapse in political support for a government that was installed, not through the popular vote, but through the undemocratic intervention of the Supreme Court.

All the more reason for care in selecting the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. Before entrusting any individual with the executive power of the American government for the next four years, the ruling elite puts them through their paces. This involves a process of political competition among the candidates and manipulation of public opinion through the mass media, which is not an exact science and has many uncertainties. But notwithstanding such complexities, in the final analysis the ruling elite will choose the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. Iowa was the first step in that decision.

It has been clear for several months that there are grave reservations about Dean in ruling circles. His campaign peaked several weeks before Iowa with the endorsements by former vice president Al Gore and former senator Bill Bradley, the two major candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in

2000. But Dean has been under relentless attack in the media since the New Year began, and this certainly had its impact in Iowa.

The concerns over Dean relate not so much to his political program, including his avowed opposition to the war, which is well within the prescribed parameters of bourgeois politics. Dean has made it clear that he opposes withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and supports the Bush administration's broader campaign of military intervention all over the world, the so-called "war on terror."

From the standpoint of the ruling elite, Dean's campaign, fueled by an upsurge of antiwar sentiment and the mobilization of a section of college-age youth, represents something of an unknown quantity. With the Democratic Party so lacking in any genuine popular base, the impact of such a campaign is unpredictable. So is Dean himself—the long-time governor of a tiny state, with a population smaller than that of a mid-sized city, who has operated largely outside the scrutiny of the political and media establishment.

The television networks, the big newsweeklies, and most important daily newspapers all published scathing critiques of the Dean campaign. In some cases, as in an editorial by the *Washington Post*, the media openly branded Dean "out of the mainstream" of US politics. For the most part, such sentiments were attributed to Dean's rivals within the Democratic Party—although the White House and the Republican National Committee also made their contribution.

This criticism focused not only on political remarks considered beyond the pale, such as Dean's comment—stating an obvious truth—that the American people were no safer following the capture of Saddam Hussein. It became increasingly personal and vituperative, directed at his choleric temperament and even at his relationship with his wife, an MD who is continuing her practice while her husband campaigns.

The media barrage had its impact both on the Iowa campaign and on the candidate himself. Dean adapted to the criticism by shifting to the right. He virtually effaced the differences between his position on the war and that of rivals such as Clark, Kerry and Edwards—differences that were not all that great in the first place, since Dean supports the US occupation of Iraq.

Dean's personal appearances in Iowa became increasingly

problematic. He engaged in a televised shouting match with an elderly Bush supporter who challenged him at a campaign event. He appeared flummoxed when attacked during the final Iowa debate by Al Sharpton about his record on hiring minorities for top state offices in Vermont (which has virtually no black or Hispanic population).

Media coverage of the Iowa caucuses generally depicted the affair as an example of democracy at its finest. In fact, the 122,000 who attended the caucuses for Kerry, Edwards, Dean and Gephardt were fewer than the number attending in 1988, the last multi-candidate Democratic contest, between Gephardt, Michael Dukakis, Al Gore and Paul Simon.

Terry Neal, online political columnist for washingtonpost.com, was one of the few commentators to puncture the pretense. He wrote January 20, after a week in Iowa: "For all the talk about how engaged people here are in the political process, you almost never meet a person outside of campaign events who professes much enthusiasm or interest in the process. To put this thing in perspective, no matter what the turnout is, it'll be a pittance of the half-million registered Democrats in a state of nearly three million people. Given that, it's a little astonishing how much media attention the results will get."

As for the claims that the Iowa caucus-goers were carefully weighing the political programs and capabilities of the candidates, there is far more evidence that very few political distinctions were drawn, and that many people voted on the basis of superficial considerations: the "tone" of candidates' ads, how they looked when they criticized their opponents, even their physical appearance.

There were some attempts in the media to suggest that the Iowa vote signified a shift to the right among Democratic voters. One AP dispatch said flatly, referring to Dean, "His anti-war, antiestablishment message didn't resonate." *Des Moines Register* political columnist David Yepsen claimed that Kerry and Edwards were moderate alternatives to the more liberal Gephardt and Dean.

But there is no reason to believe such claims. There were few clear distinctions among the candidates on either foreign or domestic policy. Entrance polls showed that 75 percent of the caucus goers opposed the war in Iraq and 50 percent strongly opposed the war. The most widespread sentiment was hostility to the Bush administration and Bush personally. Yet, more of those voting backed Kerry—who supported Bush's war resolution—than Dean and Dennis Kucinich, who opposed it.

Similarly, on social and economic questions, both Kerry and Edwards focused their last week of campaigning on populist appeals to the concerns of working-class and middle-class families. Both postured as militant opponents of the policies of the Bush administration on education, health care, tax cuts for the wealthy and attacks on environmental protection laws.

The outcome of the contest for the Democratic nomination remains to be determined. Kerry, Edwards and Dean

immediately flew to New Hampshire, whose primary will take place next Tuesday, January 27. Dean is leading in the polls there, trailed by retired general Wesley Clark, who skipped the Iowa campaign. New Hampshire is followed by seven states holding caucuses and primaries on February 3, and the contest could continue until March 2, when primaries in California, New York, Ohio and other states complete the choosing of the bulk of the delegates.

Two weeks before the Iowa caucuses, the campaign was said to have boiled down to two tiers: Dean and Gephardt battling for first place; Kerry and Edwards vying for third place, with the loser likely to be forced out. But Gephardt's campaign essentially collapsed, demonstrating the utter prostration of the trade union bureaucracy.

Some 21 industrial unions backed Gephardt's candidacy, based largely on the promise of protectionist measures against foreign imports. According to polls of those entering the Iowa caucuses, Gephardt won only 22 percent of the union vote—and only 11 percent overall—in a state that he had won in the 1988 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The media gushed over Gephardt's appearances with Teamsters president James Hoffa, who barnstormed through the state with a coterie of well-stuffed union officials and their bodyguards, but this did not cut much ice with rank-and-file workers in any union.

There was one more sidelight to the Iowa caucuses. Several hours before the caucuses began, a spokesman for Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, who placed fifth in the contest with 2 percent of the vote, announced he had struck a deal with Senator Edwards for mutual support in those precincts where Edwards or Kucinich did not reach the 15 percent required to win a delegate.

The Kucinich spokesman said that all the other candidates had sought such an agreement. He did not explain why Kucinich, avowedly the most fervent opponent of the war, would reach a vote-swapping agreement with Edwards, who voted to authorize the war, except to say that Edwards had a "positive message" and that Kucinich "likes him a lot."



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact