

US Democratic primary votes reveal growing popular hostility to Bush

Patrick Martin
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Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts widened his lead in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination February 3, winning five of the seven primaries and caucuses and the majority of the delegates at stake. Senator John Edwards won the South Carolina primary, while former general Wesley Clark won a tight three-way race in the Oklahoma primary.

Kerry won over 50 percent of the vote in Missouri, North Dakota and Delaware, and over 40 percent in Arizona and New Mexico. Democratic Party officeholders and big financial contributors have begun to swing behind his campaign, and on Friday he was slated to receive the endorsement of Missouri Congressman Richard Gephardt, who abandoned his own presidential campaign after losing the Iowa caucuses January 19.

In terms of delegates won, however, the results of the third week of primaries were well short of conclusive. Kerry now has 261 delegates, just over 12 percent of the 2,162 required to win the Democratic nomination. Former Vermont governor Howard Dean follows with 121, then Edwards with 102, and Clark with 81.

Dean, the frontrunner nationally until mid-January, polled a derisory 9 percent and received no delegates in Missouri, the most populous state among those voting Tuesday. In South Carolina and Arizona, states with large black and Hispanic populations, the turnaround was even more dramatic. Dean topped the polls in both states a month ago. But on Tuesday he won 4 percent in South Carolina after spending \$1 million on television ads, and 14 percent in Arizona, where he won three delegates at the cost of \$1.4 million in TV ads.

Dean initially suggested that even without winning any states he would carry on his campaign through the March 2 “Super Tuesday” contests, which include California, New York, Ohio and four New England states. He was quickly called on the carpet by key supporters, including officials of the two major unions that have backed his campaign, AFSCME and SEIU, and announced that he would quit the race if he did not win the Wisconsin primary February 17.

Kerry’s two other major opponents, Clark and Edwards, were reduced to the status of Southern regional candidates, winning Oklahoma and South Carolina respectively, and moving on to campaign in Tennessee and Virginia, which vote February 10. Neither is expected to challenge Kerry effectively in such northern states as Michigan, Washington, Maine and Wisconsin.

There has been some effort by the media to build up Edwards as Kerry’s main rival in the wake of the South Carolina vote, Kerry’s only sizeable defeat, where Edwards won by 46 percent to 30 percent. Edwards, however, had predicted he would win delegates in each of the seven states voting Tuesday, and failed in four of the seven, falling short of the 15 percent threshold.

The most stridently pro-war candidate in the Democratic campaign, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, quit the race Tuesday night after poor results. He polled less than five percent of the total votes cast in the seven states and did not win a single delegate. Lieberman’s right-wing

campaign, pledging to continue the “third way” policies of Bill Clinton and enthusiastically backing the invasion and occupation of Iraq, won little support.

In Delaware, for example, Lieberman campaigned extensively, had the backing of the state’s senior Democratic politicians, and still won less than 11 percent of the vote. In Arizona, he was endorsed by the *Arizona Republic*, the state’s largest newspaper, but won only 7 percent, and no delegates.

The other Democratic candidates fared even worse. Reverend Al Sharpton, despite concentrating all his efforts in South Carolina, where half the Democratic primary voters are black, won only ten percent of the vote and not a single delegate. He trailed Edwards and Kerry by a wide margin even in the Sixth Congressional District, with the largest concentration of black voters. Dennis Kucinich won no more than one percent in any primary (although slightly higher in the caucuses), and no delegates.

Tuesday’s balloting continued the trend shown in Iowa and New Hampshire, with heavy turnouts in many of the states by voters deeply concerned over joblessness and economic insecurity, opposed to the US war in Iraq, and hostile to the Bush administration.

This opposition at present, however, takes the form of illusions that one or more of the Democratic candidates represents a genuine alternative to the policies of the Republican right.

The vote in South Carolina was a record for a Democratic primary, while the turnout in Arizona doubled the total of the 2000 primary. The most striking result was in Oklahoma, where 300,000 voted in the Democratic primary in a state where only 470,000 voted for Democrat Al Gore in the 2000 general election. Primary turnout is normally a fraction of the general election vote.

Exit polls confirmed the widespread anger at the Bush administration. The figures were so stark that the *Washington Post*—a fervent supporter of the war in Iraq—headlined its analysis of voting patterns: “Rising Anti-Bush Sentiment Driving Democrats to Polls.” The *Post* wrote: “The Democratic presidential contest went national yesterday, and what was true in Iowa and New Hampshire proved true coast to coast: Voters in these elections are deeply dissatisfied with President Bush, and defeating him in November is their prime issue, according to exit polls.”

In all five primary states—Delaware, South Carolina, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arizona—exit polls found that eight out of ten voters described the US economy as “not good” or “poor.” (The two caucus states, New Mexico and North Dakota, had no exit polling). Nearly 50 percent said their families were worse off financially than four years ago, before Bush took office.

More than half of Democratic voters in Delaware described themselves as “angry” at the Bush administration, with slightly lower figures in Arizona and Missouri. One-third of voters in Oklahoma and South Carolina said they were “angry,” while another 40-50 percent said they were “dissatisfied” with the Bush White House.

More than 80 percent of those voting in the Delaware Democratic primary opposed Bush's decision to go to war with Iraq. The figure in South Carolina—home to many military bases—was nearly 75 percent opposed to the war, and over 80 percent among black voters. Two thirds of those voting in Arizona and Missouri opposed the war, and this figure was nearly 60 percent in Oklahoma.

Given that the states voting February 3 are largely rural and generally considered to be among the more politically conservative states, the exit poll numbers are all the more significant. (Bush carried five of the seven in 2000 and lost New Mexico by only a few hundred votes). Particularly significant is the opposition to the Iraq war in both South Carolina and Oklahoma, where more than 70 percent of the voters were from households with at least one active-duty soldier or veteran.

The February 3 primaries and caucuses coincided with the publication of several new national opinion polls on the presidential race, showing Kerry would defeat Bush by a comfortable 53-46 margin if the election were held now, with Edwards as well holding a narrower edge on Bush. The polls also showed a majority opposing the war and a dramatic decline in Bush's approval rating, which fell below 50 percent.

The primary turnout, the exit poll results and the national opinion polls all belie the image of the Bush administration which has been systematically cultivated by the American media over the past three years, portraying Bush as a political colossus with widespread popular support and unchallenged standing on the fundamental issues of war and peace.

The initial weeks of the presidential campaign have begun to reveal the real state of popular opinion. Bush is an unelected president, regarded by a substantial fraction of the public, if not a majority, as illegitimate. Installed in office by the Supreme Court after losing the popular vote, Bush nonetheless behaves as though he had an overwhelming public mandate for his extreme-right policies. This pretense has been sustained by the cringing of the congressional Democrats and the adulation of the media, especially since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The perception that Kerry has the best chance to defeat Bush largely accounts for his rise in the polls, rather than his policies or personality, which hardly differentiate him from his main rivals, Edwards, Clark, and former Vermont governor Howard Dean. Many Democratic primary voters have cited Kerry's record as a decorated Vietnam War veteran as a significant advantage against the expected Republican smear tactics in the fall. The Bush campaign will denounce critics of its policies in Iraq as unpatriotic, portraying them as supporters of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

Despite the illusions evident in the primary voting, Kerry is scarcely credible as the vehicle for opposition to the American political establishment. He is the son of a former US diplomat, raised in privileged circumstances, and married to one of the wealthiest women in America, Teresa Heinz Kerry, heir to a \$600 million ketchup fortune. As some of his primary rivals have pointed out, Kerry has received more campaign contributions from large corporate interests, in the course of his 20-year career, than any other senator.

During a campaign swing in New Hampshire prior to that state's primary, Kerry denied that his pseudo-populist attacks on special interests amounted to "class warfare." According to an account in the *Los Angeles Times*, Kerry told his audience, "I'm a capitalist, and I believe in creating wealth. You can't be a Democrat who loves jobs and hates the people who create them. What we have to do is recognize that there is an enlightened, good capitalism, and there's a robber-baron capitalism. What George Bush has unleashed is a creed of greed that does a disservice to all people in business."

Kerry represents a section of the ruling elite which is increasingly concerned that the recklessness of the policies of the Bush administration—both its sweeping overseas military commitments, and its staggering budget deficits at home—are creating the conditions for a social

and political explosion in the United States. Kerry and his Democratic rivals are appealing to popular anger over the war in Iraq, the lack of good-paying jobs, the widening gulf between rich and poor, and the Bush administration's attacks on democratic rights, but only to divert these sentiments into channels which do not threaten the profit system.

The replacement of Bush in the White House by a Democrat would not significantly change the conditions facing working people in the United States. In the aftermath of such a change of administrations, there will still be a war in Iraq, a \$500 billion-plus budget deficit, a gargantuan US balance of payments deficit, a stagnant job market, and a deepening social crisis.

In foreign policy, Kerry, Dean, Edwards and Clark are all committed to continuing the US occupation of Iraq, whatever their criticisms of how Bush organized the invasion. More broadly, the Democrats like the Republicans uphold the essential strategic goal of the Bush administration: to maintain the unchallenged military supremacy of American imperialism over any potential threat. Thus the criticism by Kerry and Dean of Bush's policies in Iraq has been coupled with pledges to be more aggressive in dealing with North Korea, Iran and China.

All four Democrats have pledged to Wall Street a more "responsible" fiscal policy, meaning that the working class will pay for Bush's huge budget deficits, through cuts in social spending or increases in consumption and payroll taxes. Here Dean has taken the lead, criticizing his rivals for suggesting that it is possible to expand health care coverage without imposing the cost on working people.

None of these candidates represents any interruption in the steady shift to the right by the Democratic Party, a decades-long process which has seen the Democrats abandon all talk of redistribution of wealth or even of significant social reforms.

Working people in the United States are trapped in a political system in which both of the officially recognized parties are controlled by the moneyed elite—the top one or two percent of the population which controls the wealth and dictates the conditions of life of the vast majority.

War, social reaction and the assault on democratic rights are the products not of one or another politician or bourgeois party. They arise from an insoluble, historical crisis of the capitalist system itself.

It will be possible to conduct a serious struggle against imperialist war and defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights only when the working class breaks with the two-party system and begins to build an independent political party of its own based on a socialist program. The Socialist Equality Party is running in the 2004 presidential election to develop this understanding and lay the basis for an independent political mass movement of working people fighting for a revolutionary restructuring of society in the interests of the working class.



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