

Obama wins South Carolina Democratic presidential primary

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Senator Barack Obama of Illinois won Saturday's Democratic presidential primary in South Carolina by a decisive 2-to-1 margin over Senator Hillary Clinton, with former senator John Edwards trailing in third place. The defeat was a serious blow to the Clinton campaign, which had used former president Bill Clinton as a surrogate throughout most of the final week of the contest.

Voter turnout in South Carolina set records, nearly doubling from the 2004 primary won by Edwards over Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, who went on to win the Democratic nomination that year. The turnout of 532,000 in the Democratic primary considerably exceeded the 444,000 votes cast in the Republican primary last week, although the Republican Party enjoys a sizeable advantage in voter registration and has carried the state in the last seven presidential elections.

Obama alone received more votes than the total number cast for all Democrats in the 2004 primary. Hillary Clinton, who was a badly beaten second, actually received as many votes as John McCain did in narrowly winning the Republican primary one week ago.

Exit polls suggested a sharp swing to Obama over the last few days of the campaign, as he moved from a relatively close 38-30 margin over Clinton to a 55-27 margin at the ballot box on January 26. The shift seems largely due to an unexpected surge in turnout among black voters and young people. Black turnout increased by 150,000 compared to the 2004 primary, with the bulk of those votes going to Obama.

The Democratic presidential nomination contest remains undecided with barely a week before "Super Tuesday," February 5, when 15 states hold primaries and seven hold caucuses to elect delegates to the Democratic National Convention. Neither Clinton nor Obama holds a discernible advantage going into those contests, which include the first large states to elect delegates, including New York, California, Illinois, Georgia and New Jersey.

The South Carolina contest marked a revival of the media preference for Obama over Clinton which was particularly evident after his victory January 3 in the Iowa caucuses. There was gloating from right-wing media pundits over the setback for the Clintons, and near-breathless adulation for Obama from more liberal commentators.

Obama has also received the lion's share of recent endorsements from Democratic Party officeholders, including governors and senators in states like Arizona, Nebraska, Virginia and Missouri who are identified as moderates rather than liberals, and members of the "Blue Dog" group in the House of Representatives, a right-wing caucus that backs fiscal austerity.

On Sunday, Obama received the endorsement of Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, daughter of the assassinated president John F. Kennedy, in an op-ed column in the *New York Times*. There was widespread speculation that Senator Edward Kennedy, longtime leader of Senate liberals, would endorse Obama in time for the Massachusetts primary, one of the 22 Democratic presidential contests set for February 5.

The groundswell for Obama from the right-wing media has a self-interested subtext: Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a multitude of conservative pundits calculate, rightly or wrongly, that the Illinois senator, with only three years in national politics, would be a weaker opponent than Hillary Clinton in the November election.

Within the Democratic Party itself, the contest between Clinton and Obama—for all its acrimony—has no clear political lines of differentiation. Obama criticizes Clinton over her 2002 vote to authorize the war in Iraq, but both advocate only a limited drawdown of US forces in the context of indefinite US occupation of that country. On domestic policy, both adhere to the line first established in Bill Clinton's presidency, that all social and economic initiatives must be subordinated to reassuring the financial markets of the fiscal responsibility of the Democratic Party.

The overwhelming margin for Obama among black voters (81 percent) and sizeable lead among younger white voters (52 percent among those under 30) reveal widespread illusions—heavily promoted by the media—that the election of an African-American president, regardless of his policies and program, would represent a step forward for the American people.

Obama sought to capitalize on such illusions in his victory speech on the night of the primary, in which he cited the transformation of race relations in South Carolina, the state which sent diehard segregationist Strom Thurmond to the US

Senate for 50 years.

There is no doubt that many of those voting for Obama believe they are dealing a blow to the race-based politics which have been the foundation for Republican Party electoral victories, particularly in the South, for the past three decades.

But the fundamental divide in American life is class, not race: the colossal social gulf between the vast majority who work for a living and struggle to survive—black, white, Hispanic, Native American and Asian—and the financial aristocracy, the top one percent (or less) of the population, who dominate the economy and political structure of the United States.

The Democrats and Republicans, whatever their differences on particular issues, are both political instruments of the financial oligarchy, defending the profit system and the “right” of the multi-millionaires to call the shots in American society. In that respect, Obama is just one more representative of this corporate elite, differing only in the color of his skin and his ancestry.

His victory speech Saturday night was a clear testimonial to this fact. In one key passage, Obama declared his opposition to “a politics that uses religion as a wedge and patriotism as a bludgeon, a politics that tells us that we have to think, act, and even vote within the confines of the categories that supposedly define us, the assumption that young people are apathetic, the assumption that Republicans won’t cross over, the assumption that the wealthy care nothing for the poor and that the poor don’t vote, the assumption that African-Americans can’t support the white candidate, whites can’t support the African-American candidate, blacks and Latinos cannot come together.”

In the midst of this vague rhetoric of national unity comes the real message: Obama rebuts “the assumption that the wealthy care nothing for the poor.” He added later that his campaign was “not about rich versus the poor.” Given that he has the enthusiastic support of Warren Buffett, the second-wealthiest capitalist in America, and has raised more money on Wall Street than any other candidate, he could say nothing less.

Equally significant were his repeated efforts to extend an olive branch to the Republican Party. Clearly distinguishing himself from the Clintons, without referring to them by name, Obama claimed to reject “bitter partisanship that causes politicians to demonize their opponents... It’s the kind of partisanship where you’re not even allowed to say that a Republican had an idea, even if it’s one you never agreed with. That’s the kind of politics that is bad for our party. It is bad for our country. And this is our chance to end it once and for all.”

This was a reference to Obama’s by-now-notorious comment on Ronald Reagan, first reported in an interview with a Reno, Nevada newspaper during that state’s caucus campaign. The Democratic candidate went beyond noting that Reagan’s presidency marked a qualitative change in American politics—something no objective analyst would dispute—to praise Reagan as someone who “put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it. He tapped

into what people were already feeling, which is, we want clarity, we want optimism, we want, you know, a return to that sense of dynamism and, you know, entrepreneurship that had been missing.”

This paean to Reagan demonstrates that Obama embraces one of the stupidest nostrums of official American politics: the alleged political genius of the former movie actor turned ad pitchman for big business. The Clintons have made their own comments along the same lines. Indeed, the thrust of Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign and of the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, which he headed at the time, was to revamp the Democratic Party along the lines of the new political universe supposedly created by Reagan.

The Clintons, for their own factional reasons, deliberately distorted Obama’s comment, suggesting that he had hailed Reagan’s policies in office. Commercials that they ran in South Carolina making that charge were widely criticized by other Democratic politicians.

They also attacked Obama’s lack of experience in office and prospects for winning the general election, dismissing his candidacy in a way that seemed deliberately provocative to many black voters. This culminated in Bill Clinton’s remark, as the polls closed in South Carolina and the scale of Obama’s victory became evident, making a comparison to Jesse Jackson’s failed presidential campaigns 20 years ago. “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina in ’84 and ’88,” Clinton said. “Jackson ran a good campaign. And Obama ran a good campaign here.”

Clinton did not compare Obama’s efforts to those of more recent Democratic victors in South Carolina. These included John Edwards in 2004, who like Jackson did not go on to win the nomination, as well as Al Gore in 2000 and himself in 1992, who both did. The racial implications of his comment were unmistakable.

As the *New York Times* observed, “Bringing up Jesse Jackson in response to a question about Mr. Obama seemed to be another way of pointing out that Mr. Obama is black and at the same time marginalizing his importance, as well as South Carolina’s, since Mr. Jackson did not become the nominee.”



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