

On the eve of the Iowa caucuses

# Corporate money, media manipulation and the US elections

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Thursday night's Democratic and Republican precinct caucuses in Iowa mark the official beginning of the 2008 presidential campaign, although the race has actually been under way for more than a year. The massive media focus on Iowa (January 3), the New Hampshire primary (January 8) and other early contests serves more to obscure than to illuminate the fundamental social and political issues involved in the selection of the candidates who will represent the two major parties in the November election.

The process by which the next US president is selected has little to do with democracy. The two-party system guarantees a political monopoly by corporate interests. The choice of nominee in each party is the outcome of a complex struggle within the ruling elite in which vast sums of money and a corporate-controlled media play the major role, not the sentiments and needs of the American people.

The Democratic Party and the Republican Party are both political instruments of the American financial aristocracy. They are not identical, because they employ different appeals, have different histories, and to some extent speak for different factions of the corporate-financial elite, but the two big business parties have the same basic social function: maintaining the domination of American society by the corporate-financial elite and upholding the worldwide interests of American imperialism.

Both parties would be considered right-wing in any other advanced capitalist country—the Republican Party semi-fascist or extreme right, the Democrats conservative or center-right. Both parties uphold the capitalist market as the supreme social organizing principle, while differing slightly on the degree of government regulation to be applied. Both parties uphold the “national interest” of American imperialism—i.e., its “right” to dominate the world—while differing on the exact mix of diplomacy, military force and political subversion to be used in accomplishing that goal.

Perhaps the most important political task of the two-party system is to sustain the illusion that it is possible to represent the enormous complexity of American society through such a restricted political mechanism. America is a country of immense diversity, with vast regional, cultural, social and ethnic differences, yet the two parties which monopolize official political life draw their principal backing and much of their leading personnel from the same narrow social layer—the top five or ten percent.

That being said, it is not an easy or simple affair for the ruling elite to exercise its indubitable control over the election process and select its next president. There are many factors—social, political, even personal—interacting in complex and frequently unpredictable ways.

The ruling elite itself is deeply divided on various issues.

Perhaps the most unpredictable factor is the intersection between major world events—such as the financial crisis touched off by the US subprime mortgage collapse, or the assassination of former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto—and a US electoral system that is increasingly artificial and inflexible.

In the 2008 campaign, the selection of the Republican and Democratic candidates could well be completed by February 5, more than six months before the nominating conventions and nine months before the general election. Should major events intervene between February and November to upend the political situation in the United States, the ruling elite may require a political representative quite different from those chosen by the primary election campaigns.

In the campaign for the presidential nominations of the two parties it is virtually impossible to exaggerate the importance of money. The entire framework of the 2008 presidential campaign was established by the fundraising of the candidates during the preceding year, which in turn drove media expectations and coverage and to a large extent the poll numbers as well.

On the Democratic side, Senator Barack Obama became a credible contender for the nomination not because of his identification with any particular political position—his is arguably the most substance-free of the major candidacies—but because he was able, in the first quarter of 2007 and thereafter, to match Hillary Clinton dollar-for-dollar in fundraising.

Two other senators, Joseph Biden of Delaware and Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, with far longer records in Washington, have been treated as also-rans because comparatively weak fundraising results triggered poor media coverage and poll results to match.

On the Republican side, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney owed his early frontrunner status to a combination of aggressive fundraising and a willingness to draw on his enormous personal fortune, estimated as high as half a billion dollars. Several Republican hopefuls, such as Senator Sam Brownback and former Virginia governor James Gilmore, dropped out months before the first vote was cast because of difficulty raising money.

Despite his late surge in opinion polls, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee is still regarded as a long-shot because his campaign has raised only a small fraction of the funds available to his main rivals, Romney, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, former Senator Fred Thompson and Senator John McCain.

The Iowa caucuses themselves resemble more an auction than an electoral competition. As few as 80,000 people will attend the Iowa

Republican caucuses, while no more than 150,000—that would be a record turnout—will attend the Democratic caucuses.

By the time the caucus-goers assemble on the night of January 3, according to one published estimate, the Democratic candidates will have spent more than \$25 million, well over \$100 for each caucus attendee, with the Republicans just short of that per capita figure.

Obama and Clinton each have more than 500 full-time paid staff canvassing the state, with comparable though smaller numbers for Edwards and Romney. Recent surveys of likely caucus-goers suggest that they have been contacted an average of half a dozen times by one campaign or another.

The small number of Iowans who will cast votes, as well as the small size of the first primary state, New Hampshire, makes it far easier for political establishments in both parties and the media bosses to manipulate the outcome of the nomination campaign. One has only to reflect back on the demolition of the Howard Dean campaign in 2004, when a last-minute media barrage tipped the Iowa caucus to Senator John Kerry, and Dean's remarks to a post-caucus rally were hyped as a psychological meltdown that called into question not only his viability as a candidate, but even his sanity. Dean never recovered.

The campaigns of the main candidates have been remarkably devoid of actual politics. On the Democratic side, the competition between Obama, Clinton and Edwards largely revolves around different styles, tones and attitudes, and a series of petty incidents involving campaign misconduct of one sort or another, rather than actual policy differences.

On the Republican side, each major candidate represents an antagonistic faction of a party that appears on the brink of disintegration: Romney, Wall Street; Huckabee, the Christian right; McCain, the military and Iraq war enthusiasts; Giuliani, the hardliners for the "war on terror;" Thompson, the Southern-based party establishment.

The outcome in Iowa, let alone in the nominating contest as a whole, remains uncertain in both parties. It will be determined by a struggle of elements within the ruling elite in which popular sentiments will play a secondary role. Certain general features of the campaign are already evident, however.

There are two central issues in the election: the growing social polarization in the United States exacerbated by the deepening financial crisis, and the growth of American militarism, with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in their seventh and fifth years, respectively, and new interventions looming in Iran, Pakistan and elsewhere.

As far as domestic issues are concerned, all the presidential candidates confront the fundamental fact of American social life—the deepening division of society between the super-rich and everyone else. The two parties approach this issue in distinct ways, in keeping with their different roles as instruments of the ruling elite.

The Republican tactic is to ignore and distract, using largely or wholly concocted right-wing provocations to fool the more backward and unreflective portions of the population: immigrant-bashing, gay-bashing, terrorism scare-mongering, and appeals to religious prejudice. This is combined with an unabashed defense of property and privilege (the "free" market), together with demonizing as "class warfare" any mention of the socio-economic divide.

The Democratic tactic is to acknowledge the growing social division while offering various largely token measures that leave the fundamental social structure and distribution of wealth untouched. Clinton, Obama and Edwards all make reference to the accumulation of great wealth on Wall Street, and contrast it to the increasingly

difficult struggle facing working people.

None of them proposes any fundamental overhaul of the economic system that generates such inequality. All three are part of the top one percent that reaps the lion's share of the wealth produced by the labor of the working class. Their main difference is the degree of volume and intensity of their quasi-populist demagoguery (Clinton the least strident, Edwards the most). In the last days in Iowa, Edwards has stepped up his (rhetorical) attack on corporate interests to a level exceptional in recent US two-party politics, clearly sensing a growing degree of social and economic desperation among voters.

The only Republican responding in the same vein is Huckabee, the Baptist preacher who is leading in the Iowa polls because of his support among fundamentalist Christians and home schoolers. He attempts a risky combination of both right-wing and populist demagoguery, combining appeals to Christian fundamentalist bigotry with imprecations against Wall Street interests. For this reason he has drawn increasing fire from the Republican political establishment.

On foreign policy, all the major candidates in both parties are committed to continuing the war in Iraq indefinitely, despite the Democrats' pretense that they will "end the war." What is most remarkable here is how far both parties have separated themselves from public opinion.

In New Hampshire, for instance, according to a recent poll, 98 percent of all Democrats and 74 percent of all independents favor withdrawing all US troops from Iraq within a year. None of the three likely Democratic nominees will commit themselves to such a policy, or will carry it out should they take office.

One year after antiwar voters placed the Democrats in control of Congress, the Democratic Party is seeking to ensure that the war is not even a significant issue in the presidential election campaign, working as it did in 2004 to disenfranchise those tens of millions who are appalled and outraged by the explosion of American military aggression.



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