

US presidential nomination campaigns remain deadlocked after January 19 votes

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The results of Saturday's Republican presidential primary in South Carolina and Republican and Democratic caucuses in Nevada have done little to resolve the contests for the two parties' presidential nominations. Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama remain in a close race for the Democratic nomination, while there remain four politically viable contenders within the fractured Republican contest.

Clinton won a narrow victory in the Nevada caucuses, taking 51 percent of the county delegates elected at nearly 1,000 precinct-level caucuses. Obama won 45 percent, while former senator John Edwards received only 4 percent of the county delegates—reflecting his failure, at most of the precinct caucuses, to make the 15 percent threshold required to receive delegates.

Because of the geographic distribution of the vote, Obama will likely win more Nevada delegates to the Democratic National Convention than Clinton. He won every county in the state except one—Clark County, which includes Las Vegas, and accounts for 70 percent of the statewide vote. Obama defeated Clinton among rural, small-town and upscale suburban voters, but lost decisively in urban working-class areas, except in a few largely black working-class precincts in Las Vegas.

A significant feature of the Nevada caucuses was the effective repudiation of the Culinary Workers Union by its own members, who voted by a sizeable majority for Clinton, although the union leadership endorsed Obama last week. The Clinton campaign complained loudly about the special provisions made to allow casino workers to attend caucuses on the job, and their own union supporters went to court in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent these caucuses from taking place. But in the end, Clinton won seven of the nine casino caucuses, and 268 of the county delegates chosen at these meetings, compared to 224 for Obama.

Post-election media commentary focused on the alleged racial polarization in the voting, citing exit polls that showed Clinton winning Hispanic voters by 64-27 percent and white voters by 51-38 percent, while Obama won among black voters 83-14 percent. There were numerous projections that if such a pattern holds in the February 5 "Super Tuesday" primaries in California, Arizona, Colorado, New York and New Jersey, all states with large numbers of Hispanic voters, Clinton would

win a decisive victory.

This is a continuation of the effort to use race as a reactionary political diversion from the real issues facing working people in the United States, issues which are not seriously addressed by the presidential candidates of either party: the deepening US economic crisis, the growth of social inequality, mounting attacks on democratic rights, and the escalation of US militarism in Iraq and more widely in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the last Democratic candidates' debate before the Nevada vote, held Tuesday in Las Vegas, Obama virtually dropped any criticism of Hillary Clinton for her vote to authorize the war in Iraq, and all three participants, Edwards, Obama and Clinton, agreed that US troops would remain in or near Iraq for the indefinite future. This lineup demonstrates that, as in 2004, the ruling elite is manipulating the presidential campaign to ensure that there is no outlet for popular antiwar sentiment in the two major parties.

On economic and social issues, moreover, Obama has positioned himself slightly to the right of Clinton, not to her left. Clinton took advantage of this in Nevada, focusing largely on the economy. Her vote was at least in part a reflection—distorted as it is by the reactionary framework of bourgeois politics—of the growth of popular anxiety over jobs, declining real wages, and widespread bankruptcies and home foreclosures, the last of which is particularly acute in the Las Vegas area.

Obama also damaged his own prospects with an interview with the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, in which he described former President Ronald Reagan as a figure who transformed American politics and turned the Republican Party into "the party of ideas" for more than a decade.

While the supposedly vast popularity of Reagan is an article of faith in the political establishment and the corporate-controlled media, the truth is that the Reagan administration was hated by broad sections of the working class, and it still is by those who lived through it. Clinton repeatedly attacked Obama's comment in the days leading up to the caucus. "I don't think it's a better idea to privatize Social Security," she said in one appearance at a Las Vegas printshop. "I don't think it's a better idea to try to eliminate the minimum wage."

More telling than the narrow victory by Clinton over Obama was the vast disparity between the two big business parties in the turnout for the caucuses. More than 120,000 attended the Democratic caucuses, up from 9,000 in 2004, and nearly triple the 44,000 who attended Republican caucuses. The gap is all the more significant in a state which George W. Bush carried narrowly in 2000 and 2004.

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney won the straw poll at the Republican caucuses, taking 51 percent of the vote in an event that did not commit the state's delegates and was not contested by most of his rivals. Congressman Ron Paul of Texas took 13 percent of the vote and Arizona's Senator John McCain 12 percent.

Romney's victory was his third of the campaign, following the January 15 primary in Michigan and poorly attended and largely uncontested caucuses in Wyoming January 5. Romney leads in national convention delegates, but his Nevada victory was largely overshadowed by the results of the South Carolina Republican primary, won by McCain by a narrow margin over former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, 33 percent to 30 percent. Former senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee and Romney trailed with 14 percent and 13 percent respectively.

McCain's result in South Carolina was less than impressive. Running even with Huckabee among Republican voters, with 30 percent each, McCain took the lion's share of the small independent vote to gain his narrow three-point margin of victory.

McCain actually received far fewer votes winning the state in 2008 than he did in his losing race in 2000, when he was defeated by George W. Bush by a margin of 53-42 percent. His vote total Saturday was about 140,000, just over half of the 240,000 votes he garnered eight years ago. The overall turnout in the Republican primary fell from 550,000 in 2000 to barely 400,000 this year.

The Huckabee-McCain race was described in one media commentary as "Christian soldiers vs. old soldiers," since Huckabee targeted fundamentalists and McCain appealed to the state's large population of veterans and retired military. That Huckabee lost this contest was largely owing to the efforts of Thompson, who focused his campaign in the same upstate areas where the Republican Party is dominated by evangelical voters. The former Arkansas governor was held to 40 percent of the evangelical vote, compared to well over 60 percent in Iowa, where he won the party caucuses January 3.

The Huckabee-Thompson contest included brazen appeals to fundamentalist and right-wing bigotry. Huckabee came out in defense of public displays of the Confederate flag, and compared same-sex marriage to bestiality. Thompson responded by denouncing Huckabee for referring to the US Constitution as "a living, breathing document." He said this represented a departure from a literal interpretation, and was "precisely the kind of wrong-headed thinking about the Constitution that gave us *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized

abortion across our nation, and *Lawrence v. Texas*, which decriminalized sodomy."

After finishing a poor third in a race he had declared critical, Thompson left South Carolina to fly back to his home in the Washington DC area, rather than move on to Florida, where the next Republican primary election is set for January 29. His campaign has no schedule for the upcoming week and there is widespread speculation that he will drop out of the contest and endorse McCain. Thompson was the national co-chairman of McCain's unsuccessful campaign for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination.

This sets up a likely four-way contest in Florida, where the primary is closed—i.e., only registered Republicans, not independents, may vote—a restriction that hurts McCain. There is no clear favorite among McCain, Huckabee, Romney and former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

The Florida primary is winner-take-all, meaning that a candidate could win as little as 30 percent of the vote in a four-way race and still receive 100 percent of the state's delegates to the Republican National Convention.

All four of the Republican survivors have significant obstacles to winning the nomination. McCain is widely opposed within the party establishment and by right-wing media pundits. Talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, for instance, fulminated that if McCain or Huckabee were nominated, "It's going to destroy the Republican Party. It's going to change it forever, be the end of it."

Romney is by far the best financed, owing to his huge personal fortune and connections in the world of venture capital, but he trails badly in national polls, despite having spent \$10 million more than any other candidate to promote himself. He has also been the target of anti-Mormon bigotry on the part of the Christian right.

Huckabee's campaign has no money or staff, a critical issue going into the February 5 "Super Tuesday" primaries, many of them in states like New York and California, where evangelical Christians are less numerous than in the South. Giuliani has finished sixth in five of the first six contests, where he did little campaigning, while focusing his efforts on Florida.



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