

Obama, Huckabee finish first in Iowa Democratic, Republican caucuses

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Senator Barack Obama of Illinois and former Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas won the Democratic and Republican caucuses in Iowa January 3, dealing significant setbacks to the candidates previously considered frontrunners for the two parties' presidential nominations.

Obama defeated Senator Hillary Clinton and former Senator John Edwards, getting 38 percent of the delegates selected by the caucuses, compared to 30 percent for Edwards and 29 percent for Clinton. Three other Democrats, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, Senator Joseph Biden and Senator Christopher Dodd, trailed badly and received fewer than 2 percent combined. Biden and Dodd announced they were ending their campaigns for the nomination.

A major feature of the Iowa caucuses was a sharply increased voter turnout. Some 239,000 took part in the Democratic caucuses, nearly double the number who participated in 2004 and more than four times the number who turned out in 2000.

The increased political interest is demonstrated in another comparison: the number participating in the caucuses, which required attending a two-hour meeting on Thursday night, was 50 percent more than the total number voting in the state's Democratic primary in 2006, which had a closely contested race for the gubernatorial nomination.

Young people made up a large proportion of the new caucus attendees. The number of people under 30 increased from an estimated 2,000 in 2000 and 5,000 in 2004 to as many as 52,000. The vast majority of these voted for Obama.

The comparative turnout in the two parties' caucuses reflects the unpopularity of the Bush administration and the candidates linked to it. Nearly twice as many people participated in the Democratic caucuses as in the Republican, although the state is nearly evenly balanced in party registration and split nearly 50-50 in the last two presidential contests, going narrowly for Al Gore in 2000 and narrowly for Bush in 2004. The disparity among young voters was even greater: of 64,000 people under 30 who attended caucuses Thursday, 52,000 went to the Democrats and only 12,000 to the Republicans.

Despite the attempts of the media, in the wake of his caucus victory, to build up Obama as an insurgent figure, the senator from Illinois is anything but. He has been assiduously promoted by sections of the Democratic Party establishment since his US

Senate campaign in 2004, when he was given the role of keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention.

His top campaign staffers are largely drawn from Democratic congressional circles, particularly those linked to former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and former House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt.

Obama's presidential campaign raised more money than any Democrat in history in the year preceding the general election. While Internet fundraising from small donors accounted for a well-publicized portion of this, the bulk came in large donations from well-heeled financial backers of the Democratic Party, who boosted Obama's credibility as a presidential contender when he topped Hillary Clinton's quarterly fundraising totals last year.

A profile last year in the *Washington Post* described his key fundraisers in these terms: "veterans of the Democratic financial establishment: a Hyatt hotel heiress, a New York hedge fund manager, a Hollywood movie mogul and a Chicago billionaire." His billionaire supporters include investor Warren Buffett, currency speculator George Soros, hedge fund mogul Paul Tudor Jones and the Henry Crown family. Obama raised more money on Wall Street than either Hillary Clinton or former New York mayor and Republican candidate Rudolph Giuliani.

There is no doubt that the increased turnout in Iowa and the heavy vote for Obama among young people reflect popular hostility to the Bush administration and the war in Iraq—which both Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, Obama's principal rivals, voted to authorize in 2002. But the beneficiary of this popular sentiment is a conventional bourgeois politician whose program and political appeal do not challenge in the slightest the consensus of American big business politics.

Obama specializes in hollow rhetoric about "hope," "change" and "unity," exemplified by his remarks Thursday night after he was declared the winner in Iowa. The very emptiness of his appeal makes it possible for voters opposed to Bush and disgusted with figures regarded as the "old guard" of the Democratic Party to project their desire for progressive change onto a politician who has no substantive differences with his Democratic rivals.

While he claimed Thursday night that, if elected, he would

end the war in Iraq, Obama has refused to set any deadline for the withdrawal of American troops, not even by 2013, when he would be inaugurated a second time if elected this year and reelected in 2012. He has called for intensifying US military action in Afghanistan and crossing the border into Pakistan, and has echoed the Bush administration's campaign of economic sanctions, diplomatic saber-rattling and military threats against Iran.

Obama's talk of "choosing unity over division" is calculated to obscure the reality of a class-divided society. There can be no genuine unity of interests between the class of multimillionaires and billionaires, who increasingly monopolize the national wealth and income, and the vast majority who work for a living and struggle to make ends meet.

The senator from Illinois has been promoted by elements in the American financial aristocracy because of his (relative to his peers) rhetorical polish, lack of connection to previous administrations, and bi-racial origins. Obama in the White House would not represent any fundamental change in the direction of US foreign or domestic policy, but he would, it is believed, put a new face on US imperialism, sorely needed after the debacle of the Bush presidency.

Obama's success in Iowa touched off a flood of adulatory media attention, including, significantly, friendly commentary from such right-wing figures as former Reagan/Bush cabinet member William Bennett and *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan, who praised his non-confrontational approach to business interests and the Republican Party.

The constant harping on bipartisanship is a clear signal to the ruling elite that whatever illusions Obama succeeds in arousing among young people and anti-war voters, he sees his role as a political lightning rod—someone who can be trusted to defend the status quo and work to defuse popular anger against a system that produces worsening living standards, attacks on democratic rights and endless wars.

Should Obama win the presidency, his administration will do nothing to satisfy the demands of those now being encouraged to place their political hopes in him.

An Obama nomination is by no means a certainty—still less a victory in the November election. Ten months is a long time, particularly under conditions of growing worldwide financial and political instability, which will produce many shocks within the United States.

There is no doubt, however, that Hillary Clinton has been dethroned as the Democratic frontrunner. Edwards also suffered, finishing second, no better than his showing in 2004, and losing to Obama among union voters, despite the endorsement of much of the labor bureaucracy.

If Obama wins Tuesday's New Hampshire primary and contests in Nevada January 19 and South Carolina January 26, his nomination would likely be assured on February 5, when 19 states, including California and New York, hold presidential primaries.

On the Republican side, the outcome of Iowa is far less definitive. Former Arkansas Governor Huckabee won a sizeable plurality, 34 percent to 25 percent for former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, 13 percent apiece for former Senator Fred Thompson and Senator John McCain, and 10 percent for Congressman Ron Paul. The erstwhile frontrunner, Giuliani, did not campaign in Iowa and received only 4 percent of the vote.

The contest was decided by a flood of evangelicals and other Christian fundamentalists, who comprised 60 percent of the Republican caucus attendees and overwhelmed Romney's well-financed campaign—a fact that underscores the extent to which the Republican Party in many states has become an essentially confessional organization.

Huckabee antagonized the Republican Party establishment with populist demagoguery against Wall Street financial interests. In an appearance Tuesday night on the "Tonight Show with Jay Leno"—which was picketed by striking members of the Writers Guild of America—he contrasted himself to Romney, whose \$500 million fortune derives from successful corporate takeovers and asset-stripping. "People would rather elect a president who reminds them of the guy they work with, not that guy who laid them off," he said. The Baptist minister also made thinly veiled appeals to Christian fundamentalist prejudices against Romney's Mormon religion.

Iowa does not make Huckabee the frontrunner for the Republican nomination, but it certainly sets back Romney and leaves the Republican race in confusion, with five or even six candidates (counting Ron Paul) with the resources to continue in the race for the next month.

The nomination contests in both parties have little or nothing to do with competition over policies and program and democratic decision-making. At each stage in the process that formally began Thursday, vast sums of money and the machinations of the corporate-controlled media play a decisive role in determining the outcome. The interests of working people have no representation in either of the two capitalist parties, which are neither willing nor able to genuinely respond to their sentiments and needs.



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