

Michigan primary vote shows political impact of US slide into recession

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Tuesday's presidential primary in Michigan provided another demonstration, after New Hampshire, that the gathering threat of economic recession is having a profound effect on public consciousness, although reflected in only a very distorted way through the prism of primary voting for the candidates of the two big business parties.

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney won the Republican primary by a margin of 39 percent to 30 percent for Arizona Senator John McCain. Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee finished third with 16 percent, while three other Republicans trailed badly: Texas Congressman Ron Paul with 6 percent; former senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee, 4 percent; and former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, 3 percent.

While Romney's campaign declared him once again the frontrunner, after second-place finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire, the victory only allowed the multimillionaire businessman to stave off calls for his withdrawal from the Republican race. He had every advantage in Michigan: near-unanimous support from the party establishment in the state where he was born and his father was a three-term governor in the 1960s; an advertising budget of over \$2 million, more than all the other Republicans combined; and close identification with the auto industry, which dominates the state.

McCain won the 2000 Michigan presidential primary over George W. Bush because of a large turnout of independent and Democratic voters, many of them voting in the Republican primary to show their hostility to then-governor John Engler, a Republican, who had guaranteed the state for Bush. McCain hoped to repeat this success in 2008 with the aid of favorable media coverage after his victory over Romney in New Hampshire January 8, but there was almost no response among voters.

The turnout overall was very low—below 10 percent in Detroit and barely 25 percent in the suburbs and outstate—despite the highly competitive Republican race. The lack of enthusiasm for any of the candidates was reflected in largely empty polling stations, even during the morning and evening rush hours.

An additional factor in depressing turnout was the lack of a Democratic contest, because of an intra-party squabble between the state Democratic establishment and the Democratic

National Committee. The DNC punished the state for jumping the queue and moving its primary up to January 15 by taking away its 156 delegates to the national convention and inducing two of the three leading candidates, Barack Obama and John Edwards, to remove their names from the ballot.

The result was a ballot that listed only Hillary Clinton, Congressman Dennis Kucinich, former senator Mike Gravel, and Senator Christopher Dodd, who quit the race after Iowa. The Obama and Edwards campaigns encouraged voters to choose an “uncommitted” slate, but many of their supporters did not bother to go to the polls, since no delegates were actually at stake.

Clinton's victory over “uncommitted” by a margin of 56 percent to 39 percent, was a weak showing. Two thirds of black voters chose “uncommitted.” Clinton actually lost to “uncommitted” in Washtenaw County, which includes Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan campus. Exit polls showed that Clinton led Obama only 46 to 35 percent among the fraction of Democratic voters who went to the polls, suggesting that in a contested election with a much larger turnout Obama could well have won.

Exit polls confirmed the centrality of the economy in the thinking of those who voted. Some 55 percent of voters leaving the polls cited the economy as their biggest concern, more than three times the number citing terrorism or immigration, an indication that the right-wing campaign to whip up fear and chauvinism is having a diminishing effect even among those voting for Republican presidential candidates.

The confusion and disorientation in the Republican electorate was shown in their rallying to Romney as a standard-bearer for the defense of jobs. His business record at Bain Capital, the takeover firm he co-founded, consisted of amassing a fortune of as much as \$500 million by buying up companies, reorganizing them and eliminating jobs, and then selling them off at a profit.

The mantle of jobs defender is at least the third persona Romney has assumed since he launched his presidential campaign a year ago. He first sought to appeal to Christian fundamentalists by shifting to the far right on social issues like abortion and gay marriage. This maneuver failed to produce its intended result because of the rise of Huckabee, who made thinly disguised appeals to fundamentalist prejudices against

Romney's Mormonism.

Outflanked by the Southern Baptist minister, Romney made an appeal to anti-immigrant bigotry, denouncing rivals like Huckabee, McCain and Giuliani as insufficiently harsh in their proposals for ramped-up border enforcement and mass deportations. This was also a shift, as Romney had pursued a comparatively moderate approach to immigration as governor of Massachusetts, and he was associated with big financial firms that operate on a global basis.

Romney's third incarnation was forced on him by the shift in the campaign focus to Michigan, which has the highest unemployment rate of any state, 7.4 percent—a full percentage point above the second-worst state—and in 2007 actually lost 76,500 jobs, according to the US Department of Labor.

In Michigan, Romney also captured slightly more of the evangelical vote than Huckabee, who has based his campaign on an ever-more-explicit appeal to translate Biblical literalism into government policy. In an extraordinary statement on the eve of the Michigan vote, Huckabee reiterated his support for constitutional amendments to ban abortion and gay marriage.

“I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God,” he said Monday night at a rally in the Detroit suburb of Warren. “And that's what we need to do, is to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards, rather than try to change God's standards.”

This statement was largely ignored in the national media, but it has the most reactionary implications. It would suggest the complete destruction of the separation of church and state that has been fundamental to the US constitutional structure for more than two centuries, and the establishment of a Christian theocratic state.

Huckabee and McCain had already left for South Carolina before the polls closed in Michigan. The South Carolina primary is Saturday, January 19, with McCain leading narrowly in the polls and Huckabee, Romney and Thompson effectively tied for second.

Neither of the bourgeois parties currently has a frontrunner, with polls showing Clinton and Obama essentially tied on the Democratic side, and the Republican race fractured four or five ways. The first three caucus and primary contests yielded three different winners for the Republicans, with the real possibility that a fourth winner, Thompson, could emerge in South Carolina, and a fifth, Giuliani, in Florida on January 29.

The conventional wisdom in the media and Washington political circles has been that both parties would be able to settle on their nominees by February 5—“Super Tuesday”—when 22 states hold primaries or caucuses to choose nearly half the delegates to conventions that will still be more than six months off. This is not nearly so certain now, particularly in the Republican race, where Romney has the lowest national poll numbers but the largest bank account, with Huckabee and McCain in the opposite position.

In the final analysis, the inability of the two major big

business parties to quickly decide the nomination fight is an expression of the divisions within the ruling elite. These are driven, not so much by the debacle in Iraq, where there is still wide agreement in the political establishment on maintaining the US occupation indefinitely, but by the eruption of a series of crises in the financial markets.

There is not yet any consensus on what policy should be pursued in the face of recession, widespread foreclosures, and the danger of social upheaval. The principal policy measure now being pursued—lower US interest rates—threatens to make the crisis even worse if it triggers a movement by foreign investors out of dollar-denominated assets and into assets linked to the euro or the yen.

Money and media manipulation will continue to be the major factors in determining both nominations, not genuine popular sentiments. This is particularly evident on the issue of the war in Iraq, where a clear majority of Americans favors immediate withdrawal of all US troops, a position opposed by all the major candidates for the nominations of both parties.

An additional safeguard for the ruling elite is the role of so-called super-delegates—congressmen, senators, governors and members of the national committees of the two parties, who will be seated at the convention with a full vote, alongside those chosen in primaries and caucuses.

In the Democratic contest, for instance, there are 796 such delegates, compared to the 3,253 chosen in primaries and caucuses. If the Clinton-Obama contest is still unresolved after Super Tuesday, the unelected delegates could determine the outcome.

Super delegates have a lower share of the delegate vote at the Republican National Convention. This fact, and the evident fracturing of the primary vote among half a dozen candidates, has produced the first press commentaries suggesting that the primaries will not produce a clear winner, and that a “brokered convention” could result, with the possibility of a candidate being selected who is not even in the race today.



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