

McCain leads race for Republican presidential nomination after Florida vote

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31 January 2008

Arizona Senator John McCain, the most fervent advocate of the US war in Iraq among the Republican candidates for the White House, took the lead in the campaign for the party's presidential nomination with a closely contested victory in Tuesday's Florida primary.

McCain defeated his chief rival, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, by 36 percent to 31 percent. Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani trailed in third place with 15 percent, while former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee received 14 percent and Texas Congressman Ron Paul 4 percent.

Giuliani withdrew the next day, and Huckabee's campaign is crippled by lack of financial support from business interests, leaving the upcoming February 5 contests, involving 21 states, an essentially two-man race between McCain and Romney.

The contest for the Democratic presidential nomination was also reduced to a two-person race Wednesday, with the withdrawal by former senator John Edwards. Senator Barack Obama of Illinois has a slight lead in delegates over Senator Hillary Clinton, although Clinton won Tuesday's uncontested primary in Florida. No delegates were elected in Florida because the state party violated party rules by holding the primary too early in the year.

The victory in Florida was McCain's third in the first seven Republican contests. He also won primaries in South Carolina and New Hampshire, while Romney won the Michigan primary and caucuses in Wyoming and Nevada and Huckabee won the Iowa caucuses.

Although no Republican candidate has won even 40 percent of the vote in any of the initial contests and the vast majority of convention delegates have yet to be selected, the media immediately proclaimed McCain the frontrunner and near-certain nominee.

Favorable media coverage and editorial support have played a major role in McCain's primary victories, particularly in overcoming the huge financial advantage enjoyed by Romney, a venture capitalist who is funding much of his campaign from his half billion dollar personal fortune.

Headlines in the press Wednesday were openly adulatory. Typical were the *Washington Post* front page—"After Romney's Barrage, McCain Stands Tall"—and the *Los Angeles*

Times—"The GOP could have its unifier."

McCain owed much of his margin of victory to heavy support in the Cuban-American community in south Florida, where exit polls showed him winning 54 percent of the vote compared to 14 percent for Romney, who trailed Giuliani in this segment of those voting. More than half of McCain's 100,000-vote edge over Romney came in the Miami metropolitan area.

The last few days of the Florida campaign featured a vicious exchange of smears between the two main rivals, with each accusing the other (correctly) of lying. McCain fabricated a claim that Romney was secretly in favor of a hasty withdrawal from Iraq, while Romney denounced him in turn as a "liberal" for joining with Senate Democrats to co-sponsor legislation on campaign finance reform, immigration and global warming.

The Florida primary was a further demonstration of the extremely narrow base of support for the big business parties and the lack of popular enthusiasm for their candidates and policies.

The media had depicted Giuliani as an electoral powerhouse with a national following because of his record as mayor of New York during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Giuliani campaigned almost exclusively on the issue of terrorism, to the point where one Democratic opponent, Senator Joseph Biden, observed acidly, "There's only three things he mentions in a sentence: a noun, a verb and 9/11."

Giuliani's constant invocations of 9/11 had less and less impact. Compounding his political problems in Florida was a group of New York City fire fighters and relatives of 9/11 victims, which followed him around the state with an inflatable rat bearing the name Rudy. Debunking his claim to be a hero of the terrorist attacks, they charged him with contributing to the death toll at the World Trade Center by failing to provide fire fighters with functioning radios and other acts of mismanagement and negligence and accused him of exploiting the tragedy for personal enrichment.

He ended his campaign ignominiously having won only a single delegate, despite raising tens of millions of dollars and enjoying frontrunner status in opinion polls for nearly a year. (A CBS-*New York Times* poll last August showed Giuliani with 38 percent and Fred Thompson with 20 percent leading the Republican field. Both have now quit the race without winning

a single primary or caucus.)

By the last full day of campaigning, Monday, as Giuliani flew around the state, the *New York Times* observed, “the crowds at some of the airport rallies were so small that it might have been more efficient to fly them to the candidate, instead of vice versa.” The newspaper added that some reporters “quietly worked on preparing political obituaries of Mr. Giuliani in the back of the plane while he and his staff huddled in the front.”

McCain won despite the full-throated opposition of a significant section of the Republican political establishment. Vehement denunciations of his campaign by figures such as Rush Limbaugh and a bevy of other talk-radio hosts proved not to be a significant factor in the primary result.

Despite suggestions that anti-immigration sentiment is sweeping the country, Romney failed to win significant support for his attacks on McCain’s support for a limited amnesty program, and his strident immigrant-bashing contributed to his third-place finish among Cuban-American and other Hispanic voters.

Romney lost despite having the support of the campaign organization of former governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother, and the endorsement of Liz Cheney, the vice president’s daughter and a former State Department official. Romney bought 10 times as many television commercials as McCain, outspending the entire Republican field.

Although Romney focused his campaign on his prowess as a business turnaround specialist, he actually fared worse among those Republicans—some 63 percent—who see the US economy in crisis. According to exit polls, McCain led among these voters by 43 to 27 percent, while Romney won only among those Republicans with the most optimistic impression of the economy, those in the upper-income bracket.

The *Wall Street Journal* described one campaign appearance at an airport in Sweetwater, Florida on Sunday, when Romney defended plans by General Motors to lay off workers and rejected criticism of his own role in destroying jobs through the organization of corporate buyouts and takeovers. “They’re doing what they have to to keep the company alive and well,” he said, referring to GM. He added, “There were circumstances when we were investors in enterprises and we did our best to try and keep them alive and well and in a number of cases we did.”

McCain, for his part, largely dismissed the economy as an issue. He told reporters Sunday, while campaigning in Tampa, “Even if the economy is the, quote, No. 1 issue, the real issue will remain America’s security.” He added that if voters “choose to say, ‘Look, I do not need this guy because he’s not as good on home loan mortgages’ or whatever it is, I understand about that, I will accept that verdict. I am running because of the transcendental challenge of the 21st century, which is radical Islamic extremism.”

Giving a preview of the flag-waving pro-Iraq-war campaign he would wage in the fall, McCain virtually accused Democrat

Hillary Clinton of treason Saturday—and linked Romney to her—telling a rally in Ft. Myers, “If we surrender and wave a white flag, like Senator Clinton wants to do, and withdraw, as Governor Romney wanted to do, then there will be chaos, genocide, and the cost of American blood and treasure would be dramatically higher.”

McCain would seem to have a considerable advantage in the February 5 “Super Tuesday” primaries and caucuses in 21 states, which will select nearly half the convention delegates. This is due not so much to the impact of his Florida victory—many features of it are exceptional, including the Cuban vote, the preponderance of the elderly (more than 40 percent of those voting), and the large number of military retirees and veterans—as to the configuration of what is now a three-way contest.

Giuliani withdrew from the race the day after the Florida vote and endorsed McCain, providing a significant source of new campaign financing and giving him an edge in states like New York, New Jersey and California, which all vote February 5. Meanwhile Huckabee said he would continue in the race, targeting evangelical and other fundamentalist Christian voters in southern states like Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, where Romney’s campaign would otherwise have been favored.

Given the rules governing the Republican nomination campaign, which generally provide for awarding delegates on a winner-take-all basis, either statewide or by congressional district, the February 5 contests could well give McCain an insurmountable lead in convention delegates. In Florida, for example, under the winner-take-all procedure, McCain gets all 57 delegates and his rivals receive none, although he received just over one-third of the total vote.



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