Billionaires and crackpots: US primaries select right-wing candidates for November election

Patrick Martin
12 June 2010

Democratic and Republican primary elections were held June 8 in 12 US states, including several high-profile contests to select the party nominees for governor in the largest state, California, as well as Nevada, South Carolina, Iowa, South Dakota and Maine. Nominations were at stake for six US Senate seats, from California, Nevada, Arkansas, South Carolina, Iowa and North Dakota, as well as nearly 100 seats in the House of Representatives.

Despite the enormous media attention given to these elections, and the vast sums expended by the candidates, voter turnout and popular interest were exceptionally low, an expression of the alienation of the great mass of the American people from both the officially sanctioned political parties.

Going into the June 8 primaries, the media narrative was clear: 2010 was to be the year of "anti-incumbent" sentiment, in which sitting officeholders, particularly the Democrats, who control the White House and both houses of Congress, would pay the price.

When the most endangered incumbent on the ballot Tuesday, Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, unexpectedly won her runoff for the Democratic nomination by a narrow margin, the media spin was immediately shifted. Now, headlines blared, 2010 was to be the "year of the woman."

Media pundits sagely observed that Lincoln had the same gender as four successful candidates in the Republican primaries: Meg Whitman, for governor of California; Carly Fiorina, for US Senate in the same state; Sharron Angle, for US Senate in Nevada; and Nikki Haley, for governor of South Carolina.

Given that male candidates won the preponderance of the nominations of both parties, that most female candidates were defeated, that gender was not an issue in any of the campaigns—except perhaps in the degrading South Carolina primary—and that Whitman is a billionaire and Fiorina nearly so, the fact that five women won Democratic or Republican nominations was less than compelling.

More importantly, gender—like race, ethnicity, religious persuasion and other aspects of "identity" given such attention by the media—is a completely secondary issue compared to the most fundamental social divide in America: class. And from a class standpoint, all the candidates in both parties, Democratic and Republican, are defenders of the ruling financial aristocracy and the capitalist profit system.

From the standpoint of the corporate-controlled media, however, banalities about the handful of prominent female candidates were preferable to an objective examination of the June 8 voting, and of the primary process as a whole, now largely completed.

The overriding feature of Tuesday's election, as of the previous primaries this year, is the low level of popular participation and interest, and the outsized role played by big money and media manipulation.

This was shown most starkly in California, where Whitman, the CEO of eBay, spent a staggering $71 million to buy the Republican gubernatorial nomination—approximately $70 for each vote she received—and Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett Packard, outspent two rivals by millions of dollars to win the Republican nomination to challenge incumbent liberal Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer.

Whitman and her main rival, another former Silicon Valley multi-millionaire, Steve Poizner, spent more than $100 million between them, vying for the title of the most conservative, the most opposed to government spending, and the most hostile to immigrants. The bulk of this vast sum funded television commercials that ran statewide almost continuously from February to June.

California voters, including even registered Republicans who participated in the closed primary, seemed stunned rather than mobilized by this unprecedented media blitzkrieg. The 1.7 million who voted June 8 in the Republican primary were 200,000 fewer than the number

© World Socialist Web Site

who voted in the 2006 Republican gubernatorial primary, where Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the incumbent, had only token opposition.

In the 2008 Republican presidential primary, pitting John McCain against Mitt Romney, 2.9 million voted. In the 2003 recall election that ousted Governor Gray Davis, some 9.4 million voted, 4.3 million of them for the Republican candidate and eventual winner, Schwarzenegger.

At her victory rally Tuesday night, Whitman boasted, "Career politicians in Washington and Sacramento be warned, because you now face your worst nightmare: two businesswomen from the real world who know how to create jobs, balance budgets and get things done." Given that Whitman has a personal fortune estimated at $1.7 billion, and that Fiorina took a $21 million golden parachute from Hewlett-Packard, their "real world" is separated by an unbridgeable distance from the world of California's working class, facing double-digit unemployment, crumbling public services, and wage-cutting.

Both Whitman and Fiorina have endorsed the new anti-immigrant law adopted in neighboring Arizona which authorizes police stops of anyone "appearing" to be an illegal alien—i.e., anyone of Hispanic or Asian "appearance," as judged by the authorities.

In the other high-profile race, two-term Senator Blanche Lincoln won renomination as the Democratic candidate in Arkansas, overcoming a $10 million campaign mounted by the trade union bureaucracy and the liberal pressure group Move-on.org. Lincoln was targeted for her opposition to the union-backed Employee Free Choice Act ("card check") and for opposing the public option during the healthcare debate in Congress.

In the first round of the primary, May 18, Lincoln narrowly led Lt. Gov. Bill Halter by 44.5 percent to 42.5 percent, with a third candidate taking the balance. She won the runoff narrowly, by 52 percent to 48 percent, after mobilizing political support from top national Democrats, including Obama and former president Bill Clinton, who campaigned with her during the last week and denounced the unions as "outsiders" to the state.

The decision to back Halter is a yardstick of the union leaders' cynicism and impotence. The lieutenant governor was just as right-wing as Lincoln, and got his start in politics courtesy of Wal-Mart Corp., the state's largest corporation. He drew his main support in the more conservative, rural areas, while Lincoln led in Little Rock and its suburbs, and in the heavily black counties along the Mississippi River. Among black voters statewide, Lincoln led Halter by 58 percent to 42 percent.

In Nevada, the Republican primary decided on the candidate who will challenge incumbent Senator Harry Reid, the Senate Majority leader, who is trailing badly in the polls, in large measure because the state has one of the highest unemployment rates and the highest foreclosure rate in the country.

The two main contenders were the state Republican Party chairman, Sue Lowden, and a former state representative backed by the ultra-right Tea Party groups, Sharron Angle, who won with nearly 40 percent of the vote, compared to Lowden's 26 percent. The enormous publicity given the contest did not translate into a significant increase in voter participation. Only 175,000 cast ballots in the Republican primary, compared to 140,000 in a 2006 primary where incumbent Republican Senator John Ensign ran without significant opposition.

The general election contest will pit Reid, who has a bankroll of $9.1 million from big business and the union bureaucracy, vs. Angle, who has $138,000 in cash and $170,000 in debt, as well as a political record of stupefying idiocy.

The Republican Party organization opposed her because of her ties to the Scientology cult, her support for privatization of Social Security and Medicare and the abolition of the federal Departments of Education and Energy and the Environmental Protection Administration. Angle's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill was to advocate "deregulation" of the oil industry.

Angle is also a supporter of the "Oath Keepers," a right-wing organization whose membership is limited to police and other law enforcement officials who are sworn to rise up against a prospective United Nations invasion or takeover of the country. She has called for US withdrawal from the UN, branding the organization as a prospective "one world government."

She has denounced global warming as a "hoax" while publicly supporting the storage of nuclear waste at Nevada's Yucca Flats, on the grounds that the unpopular measure will "create jobs." So bizarre are her positions that Angle has refused all media interviews and closed down her campaign web site after questions arose.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site