

Iowa debate, straw poll mark further rightward shift by Republicans

Patrick Martin
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The straw poll of Iowa Republican activists Saturday showed a further shift to the right in the Republican Party, with Christian fundamentalist congresswoman Michele Bachmann of Minnesota finishing first, just ahead of another ultra-right member of the House of Representatives, Ron Paul of Texas.

The actual numbers participating in the straw poll were miniscule, with only 16,892 votes cast in a state where more than 1.5 million people voted in the 2008 presidential election. The turnout in the straw poll was well below the record set in 1999, when nearly 24,000 participated, but up somewhat from 2007, when 14,000 voted.

Bachmann's victory was hardly a landslide, with her 4,823 votes only slightly more than the 4,671 received by Ron Paul. Former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty finished third with 2,293 votes, a poor performance that led him to quit the campaign the following day.

Those finishing behind Pawlenty but nonetheless remaining in the race included former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum (1,657 votes), former Godfather's Pizza boss Herman Cain (1,456), Governor Rick Perry of Texas, a newly announced candidate who received 718 write-in votes, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, the putative frontrunner, who received only 567 votes, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who totaled an even worse 385, multimillionaire former Utah governor Jon Huntsman (69), and Michigan congressman Thaddeus McCotter (35).

Given the tiny numbers and the completely unrepresentative character of those in attendance—campaigns paid the \$30 entry fee for most participants and organized bus and carpool transportation from all over the state—the straw poll is mainly significant for its use by the media and Republican fundraisers to winnow the field.

This took place overnight. Pawlenty issued an email message Saturday night to supporters whose subject line was "Just the Beginning," promising an aggressive campaign "over the coming weeks," including visits to New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida, primary states that follow the Iowa caucuses in the election calendar.

By the next morning, however, the moneymen behind the Pawlenty campaign—not so very numerous—had pulled the plug. Pawlenty went on ABC television's Sunday interview program

to admit, "we had some success raising money, but we needed to continue that, and Ames was a benchmark for that. And if we didn't do well in Ames, we weren't going to have the fuel to keep the car going down the road."

Pawlenty's pullout, six months before a single vote has been cast in any caucus or primary, underscores the decisive role of the financial aristocracy in picking and choosing among the candidates in both capitalist parties. No politician can win the nomination of either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party without passing muster with corporate America.

The consensus in the media is that there were now three potentially viable Republican contenders: Romney, who leads in polls in New Hampshire, the first primary state, and nationally, albeit with only 25 percent support; Bachmann, now favored to win the Iowa caucuses next February, the first actual voting; and Texas Governor Rick Perry, who announced his candidacy Saturday morning in South Carolina, the second primary state.

The three candidates personify different aspects of the ultra-right politics of the Republican Party.

Romney, by far the leader in money raising and likely the wealthiest of the contestants, with a personal fortune estimated by his own campaign at \$150 million to \$250 million, is the quintessential representative of corporate America.

Rather than his brief four-year term as governor of Massachusetts, he cites as his main credential his decades as a financial wheeler-dealer with the billion-dollar investment firm Bain Capital. The fact that only three years after such Wall Street operators wrecked the US and world economy one of them can mount a credible campaign for president speaks volumes about the completely unrepresentative and antidemocratic character of the US two-party system.

In a revealing incident at an Iowa appearance Friday, Romney declared, responding to liberal hecklers, "Corporations are people, my friend." The hecklers were demanding that taxes be raised on the corporations and the wealthy to pay for entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare, which Romney advocates cutting drastically.

Bachmann gives voice to the fanatical evangelical Christians who have long constituted the main popular base of the Republican Party and are used as its shock troops by the

corporate interests who control the party. She has claimed divine inspiration for her political decisions, including her campaigns in Minnesota for state Senate and the US House of Representatives.

Bachmann is identified with anti-gay bigotry and entered politics declaring the fight against gay marriage to be the most important issue facing America in the last 30 years. Her husband Marcus Bachmann is an unlicensed psychologist who operates a profit-making clinic and counseling service that has been accused of conducting “pray away the gay” deprogramming efforts involving homosexual patients.

During the debate Thursday night in Iowa, Bachmann was asked about her declaration that, in keeping with fundamentalist biblical interpretation, wives should be “submissive” to their husbands. She evaded the issue by equating “submission” with “respect.” She also declared her support for essentially ending Social Security and Medicare as entitlement programs.

In recent months, she has focused her efforts on demagogically appealing to popular opposition to the Obama administration’s cost-cutting health care “reform.” She seeks to tap into concerns over the plan’s cuts in Medicare spending and its moves toward the rationing of health care while denouncing it as a supposedly “socialist” measure.

Texas Governor Perry, the newest entrant into the Republican contest, is evidently directing his campaign to the southern states that have been the main electoral base of the Republican Party for the past several decades. He was lieutenant governor under George W. Bush and succeeded him in office when Bush was installed in the White House in 2000 by the US Supreme Court.

Since then, Perry has outstripped Bush in all of the political litmus tests of the ultra-right: he has approved more executions, funneled more tax breaks to corporate interests, and imposed more budget cuts in social spending, including an unprecedented \$4 billion cut in state education funding this year. On August 6, in a transparent bid to compete for Christian fundamentalist support, he sponsored a public prayer service in Houston that drew 30,000 people.

Perry has a ready-made network of fundraisers, including heavy backing from the oil industry, which enabled him to raise \$40 million for his reelection campaign as governor last year. While claiming that his state is responsible for 40 percent of all new jobs created in the United States in the last three years, he downplays other more revealing figures: Texas is number one in food stamp use and ranks near the bottom in indices of social well-being, including education.

None of the Republican candidates, either the three presumed frontrunners or the numerous also-rans, has any widespread popular support. On the contrary, opinion polls show the Republican Party to be even more unpopular than the Democrats, even under conditions where the indifference of the Obama administration to mass unemployment and social misery has become obvious to tens of millions of people.

The ultra-right trend in the contest for the Republican presidential nomination will be seized on by liberal supporters of the Obama administration, as well as their pseudo-left apologists in groups like the International Socialist Organization, as an argument for supporting Obama and the Democrats in the 2012 elections.

The advocates of supporting the Democrats as the supposed “lesser evil” seek to conceal basic political facts from the American people. First, Obama still has the support of much of the American financial aristocracy, if not the bulk of it. That is why none of the Republican candidates, with the exception of Romney, has yet been able to generate substantial financial support.

Secondly, the sole basis on which the Republicans can hope for popular support for their ultra-right campaign is the disillusionment of tens of millions of working people with the Democrats and Obama. The Democrats refuse to lift a finger to help the unemployed, the poor, the victims of the Wall Street crisis, giving the ultra-right the opportunity to posture as the advocates of “job creation” and economic growth.

The main danger to the working class arises not from any mass support currently existing for the extreme-right elements in the Republican Party. The very fact that such forces can be presented as legitimate and serious presidential candidates testifies to the bankrupt and reactionary character of the so-called “liberal” alternative within the political establishment—the Democratic Party.

These right-wing elements have set the tone for the Obama administration since it assumed power in January 2009. That is largely because in their basic anti-working-class policy, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party as a whole do not have any principled differences with the Republicans. Both parties are controlled by the US corporate-financial oligarchy and follow its dictates.

The main danger facing the working class arises from its continued political subordination to the capitalist two-party system. The main responsibility for this rests with the trade unions and their middle-class pseudo-left allies, who focus all of their efforts on blocking the emergence of a movement of the working class outside of the Democratic Party and the capitalist system that it defends.



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