

Theater of the absurd in Republican presidential debates

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Back-to-back debates over the weekend in New Hampshire demonstrated not merely the ultra-right views of the Republican presidential candidates, but the vast gulf between the preoccupations of the corporate-controlled media and political establishment and the concerns of tens of millions of working people.

The six remaining Republican presidential hopefuls participated in the two debates before Tuesday's New Hampshire primary, where the presumed frontrunner Mitt Romney, the former governor of neighboring Massachusetts, is ahead in the polls. Joining Romney on the stage were former senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who tied Romney for the lead in the Iowa caucuses January 3; former House speaker Newt Gingrich; former governor of Utah Jon Huntsman; Texas governor Rick Perry; and Texas congressman Ron Paul.

The two debates took on the character of a theater of the absurd, with multimillionaire candidates—egged on by their multimillionaire media questioners, ABC's George Stephanopoulos and Diane Sawyer on Saturday night, NBC's David Gregory on Sunday morning—vying with each other for who could enunciate the most vicious and extreme position.

To cite only a few instances, the candidates declared their support for reducing taxation on corporations to zero (Gingrich), abolishing the departments of Education, Energy and Commerce (Perry), establishing a nationwide right-to-work law (Gingrich, Perry and Romney), means-testing Social Security and Medicare (Huntsman), abolishing food stamps and Medicaid as entitlements and replacing them with block grants to the states (Santorum), slashing federal spending by \$1 trillion immediately (Paul).

The candidates made no effort to explain, nor did their media questioners ask, what would happen to the

tens of millions of working people, retired, unemployed, disabled and poor who depend on these programs for their economic and physical survival.

Their perspective was summed up by Santorum, who should have been awarded the prize for the most barefaced lie, as he denounced a passing reference to the “middle class” by another candidate. “There are no classes in America,” Santorum claimed. “We are a country that don't allow for titles. We don't put people in classes.” This amounted to acceding to a “class warfare argument,” he said, “something that should not be part of the Republican lexicon.”

The reality is that there is no major country in the world so deeply divided along class lines as the United States. The top one percent of the population—which includes all six Republicans and their Democratic opponent, Barack Obama—controls the bulk of the wealth and income, while living standards for the vast majority, including the working class and much of the middle class, have stagnated or declined.

Instead of addressing this well-known economic reality, the candidates advanced various forms of right-wing, religion-based prejudice as a means of diverting and diffusing social tensions. Gingrich claimed “there's a lot more anti-Christian bigotry today” than discrimination against blacks, gays or women. Perry denounced what he called “the administration's war on religion.” Santorum presented himself as the most consistent warrior for the Christian fundamentalists against gay marriage and abortion.

Huntsman and Romney were less able to adopt this type of demagoguery, since, as adherents of the Mormon Church, they are viewed with suspicion by many Christian fundamentalist groups. They focused largely on free-market nostrums such as cutting spending, taxes and regulations on business, while Ron Paul

emphasized his right-wing libertarian position (and sought to excuse his past connections with fascistic, racist and neo-Nazi elements).

On foreign policy, less of a topic in the two debates, there was agreement except from Paul on a more aggressive US policy toward Iran, with several of the candidates, particularly Santorum, advocating immediate military action against Iranian nuclear energy production sites, which the Obama administration claims are being used to pave the way for a nuclear weapon.

The candidates were divided over Afghanistan, with Paul and Huntsman advocating a drawdown of US forces more rapid than that proposed by the Obama administration. Perry, Gingrich and Santorum criticized the current drawdown as too swift, and Romney made no criticism of the White House on this issue. On Iraq, Perry sought to outdo all his opponents in militarism, advocating the reintroduction of US combat troops into that country only days after the official withdrawal.

In the interval between proposals to launch new wars or devastate the living standards of the working class, the candidates engaged in mutual mudslinging, with accusations of personal dishonesty or failing to live up to one or another aspect of the right-wing canon.

Paul accused Gingrich of being a “chicken hawk” because he took a series of exemptions to avoid military service in the Vietnam War, and called Santorum “corrupt” and a “big-spending Republican.” Gingrich accused Romney of being a predatory, asset-stripping capitalist (which is true, but not necessarily a disadvantage in a Republican primary) and charged Paul and Romney with lying (ditto). Perry accused all of his opponents of being “Washington insiders,” while Santorum and Gingrich both accused Romney of being a “moderate” during his political career in Massachusetts.

The dynamic of the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination reflects the rightward trajectory of the whole capitalist political establishment in America. President Obama has moved sharply to the right since his election in 2008, expanding the bailout of Wall Street begun under Bush, escalating Bush’s war in Afghanistan, and intensifying the attacks on democratic rights at home justified in the name of the “war on terror.”

As a consequence, the Republican candidates have

moved even further to the right, combining their anti-working-class policies and appeals to Christian fundamentalists with absurd rhetorical attacks on Obama as a socialist. This theme was reiterated by nearly all the candidates in the weekend debates.

Romney has become the frontrunner among the Republican candidates owing largely to his vast personal wealth, estimated at more than \$250 million, and his close connections to banking and hedge fund billionaires. The former proprietor of Bain Capital, a ruthless asset-stripper, has corralled whatever Wall Street support not locked up by the Obama reelection campaign, which has pursued the big financial interests aggressively.

While Romney leads in the polls in New Hampshire and nationally, both the campaign for the Republican nomination and the ultimate general election contest remain unpredictable. One prominent Republican billionaire, Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, announced over the weekend he was pumping \$5 million into a pro-Gingrich political action committee—also-called SuperPAC—that would flood the upcoming South Carolina primary with anti-Romney ads.



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