

Gingrich wins South Carolina Republican primary with right-wing, pseudo-populist appeal

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Former House speaker Newt Gingrich won the South Carolina Republican primary Saturday on the strength of appeals to the ultra-right Christian fundamentalists who constitute the principal popular base of the Republican Party. Some 65 percent of those voting in the primary identified themselves as evangelical Christians and they backed Gingrich over his principal rival, former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, by a 2-1 margin.

Turnout in the primary was up significantly over 2008, a change from the first two Republican contests, where voter participation was virtually the same as four years ago. Romney narrowly lost to former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum in the Iowa caucuses. He won easily in the New Hampshire primary. Gingrich finished fourth in Iowa and fifth in New Hampshire.

Near-final returns, with 99 percent of precincts counted, showed Gingrich with 40.4 percent of the vote, Romney with 27.9 percent, Santorum with 17 percent and Texas congressman Ron Paul, the remaining candidate in the race, with 13 percent.

Romney had been leading in pre-election polls in South Carolina by as much as 20 points until this week's debates, where Gingrich won standing ovations from right-wing audiences for his demagogic attacks on the poor and on the media. Exit polls suggest that Gingrich successfully appealed to economic grievances of mainly middle-class supporters of the Tea Party movement against the patrician Romney, scion of a leading industrial family, who has touted his experience as an investment banker and corporate takeover specialist.

In his victory speech, Gingrich presented himself as

the advocate of Americanism against the "radical" Obama, and as the defender of "people who are so concerned about jobs, about medical costs, about the everyday parts of life, and who feel that the elites in Washington and New York have no understanding, no care, no concern, no reliability, and in fact do not represent them at all."

"The centerpiece of this campaign, I believe, is American exceptionalism versus the radicalism of Saul Alinsky," Gingrich continued, as his audience chanted, "USA! USA!" Gingrich added a denunciation of what he called the "growing anti-religious bigotry of our elite."

Saul Alinsky was an advocate of community organizing, from a middle-class radical and anti-socialist perspective, who died in 1972, when Obama was ten years old. The only connection, if it can be called that, is that both worked in the city of Chicago as community organizers, although separated by a quarter century. Gingrich is recycling an old McCarthy-style smear from the 1990s, when he and other Republicans vilified Hillary Clinton for writing her college undergraduate thesis on Alinsky.

The repeated references to a man who died 40 years ago might appear bizarre. However, invoking the name of a Jew whose father fled Tsarist Russia gives Gingrich the opportunity to appeal to anti-Semitism, anti-communism and anti-immigrant prejudice, as well as to revive the traditional Southern bogeyman of the "outside agitator." (Alinsky was a prominent supporter of the civil rights movement).

A further appeal to bigotry came from evangelical supporters of both Gingrich and Santorum, who vilified Romney's Mormon religion as non-Christian and a

“cult.” Neither candidate could embrace such sentiments openly, but both campaigned heavily at churches and declared Christian principles to be the basis of governance. Exit polls found that those who voted primarily on the basis of religious identity backed Gingrich and Santorum overwhelmingly against Romney.

The appeals to religious and racial prejudice, combined with Gingrich’s attacks on Romney as the personification of Wall Street “elites” and his advocacy of an authoritarian presidency riding roughshod over the courts and Congress, have a distinctly neo-fascistic character.

Gingrich is a deeply unpopular figure, dating back to his role as the leader of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives in the 1990s, which twice forced the partial shutdown of the federal government in an effort to push through drastic cuts in Medicare and other social programs, and then impeached President Clinton in a scandal engineered by Clinton’s ultra-right opponents.

According to recent polls, Gingrich is viewed unfavorably by 60 percent of the American public, compared to only 26 percent that view him favorably.

That such an individual could seriously challenge for the presidency underscores the dangers confronting working people from the monopoly on US politics exercised by the two right-wing big business parties. The Obama administration has carried out the bidding of Wall Street interests throughout its three years in office, beginning with the extension and expansion of the bailout of the banks begun under George W. Bush. The White House exudes indifference to the plight of the unemployed and poor, thus lending a shred of credibility to Gingrich’s demagoguery about Obama as a “food-stamp president”, and not a “jobs president”.

According to press reports based on leaks from the White House, Obama will focus his State of the Union speech Tuesday on yet another attempt to posture as the advocate of economic equality and defender of working people against the moneyed interests. Given his record, such populist pretenses are bogus and transparently insincere, and open the door to more openly reactionary appeals to the economic grievances of working people. Gingrich even described himself as a “right-wing populist” in an interview on NBC’s “Meet the Press” program Sunday morning.

The South Carolina result ends the prospect of a quick victory for Romney, who has far more money and endorsements by top Republican officials than any of his rivals. The first three Republican contests have produced three different winners, the first time that has happened since the modern primary system was put in place.

In his concession speech, Romney made clear that he will counter Gingrich by moving further to the right and rebutting Gingrich’s pseudo-populist critique of Bain Capital, the private equity firm Romney headed for 15 years.

“Our president has divided the nation, engaged in class warfare and attacked the free-enterprise system that has made America the economic envy of the world,” Romney declared. “We cannot defeat that president with a candidate who has joined in that very assault on free enterprise. Those who pick up the weapons of the left today will find them used against them tomorrow.”

The next contest in the Republican campaign is the Florida primary on January 31, where Romney’s campaign and supporting super-PACs have spent over \$7 million already, and ten percent of the expected Republican electorate has already voted.

The contests in February are all on ground considered more favorable to Romney than Gingrich, including Nevada and Arizona, with large Mormon populations, and Michigan, where Romney’s father was governor in the 1960s. After Florida, the next primaries in southern states are not until March 6, the biggest day of primary voting.

The three contests so far have determined only 73 of the 1,144 delegates required for the nomination, and Romney leads with 31, compared to 24 for Gingrich, 10 for Santorum and 8 for Paul.



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