

Corporate money dominates US primary contests

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The campaign for the 2012 presidential nomination of the Republican Party was plunged into confusion after former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum defeated former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney in all three contests held Tuesday: caucuses in Minnesota and Colorado, and a non-binding primary in Missouri.

Tuesday's events demonstrated two hallmarks of the 2012 campaign: low turnout, reflecting popular alienation from both big business parties; and the decisive role of a handful of billionaires in sustaining the candidates and manipulating the outcome of the process.

The flooding of money into the Republican primaries received its echo earlier this week when the Obama campaign announced its full support for its own "super PAC," which was quickly followed by a scramble to prod big donors for multi-million dollar contributions.

Fewer than 50,000 people attended the Republican caucuses in Minnesota, a drop of 20 percent from the same event in 2008, which Romney won over John McCain. Romney's vote total plunged from 25,990 four years ago to only 8,228 this year, as he finished a poor third. Colorado saw a similar collapse for Romney, whose vote fell from 42,218 in 2008 to 23,012, while overall turnout fell from 70,000 to 65,000.

The biggest drop in voter turnout came in Missouri, where nearly 600,000 voted in 2008 in a three-way contest between McCain, Romney and Mike Huckabee. Tuesday's primary, reduced to a non-binding "beauty contest" because of a dispute between state and national Republican Party leaders, drew barely 250,000, and Romney's vote fell by two-thirds.

Santorum carried the Minnesota caucuses with 45 percent of the vote, compared to 27 percent for Texas Congressman Ron Paul, 17 percent for Romney and 11

percent for former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. In Colorado, Santorum received 40 percent to 35 percent for Romney, 13 percent for Gingrich and 12 percent for Paul. In Missouri Santorum won 55 percent to 25 percent for Romney and 12 percent for Paul.

Fundamentalist Christian conservatives accounted for Santorum's margin of victory in all three contests, particularly at the poorly attended caucuses in Minnesota and Colorado. He also benefited from the other candidates ignoring the Missouri contest, since it selected no delegates. Gingrich did not even bother to pay the fee required to put his name on the ballot in the state.

Although not a single delegate was selected, media headlines the next day proclaimed the outcome of the three contests to be of enormous significance, a Santorum sweep that had radically transformed the trajectory of the Republican primary campaign. There were predictions that big money would come flooding into the Santorum campaign to bolster it before the next round of primaries, February 28 in Arizona and Michigan, and then March 6 in 10 states.

And as usual in American bourgeois politics, the effect is to push the political discussion even further to the right. Romney was said to have failed to win over the ultra-right "base" of the Republican Party.

The multi-millionaire former private equity CEO responded to such concerns with a new line of attack on the Obama administration for its alleged "war on religion," citing in particular the recent decision by the Department of Health and Human Services to require Catholic colleges and hospitals to include contraception in the healthcare coverage for their employees.

Romney's status as frontrunner was put in doubt by his poor showing in all three states. He failed to win a single county in either Minnesota or Missouri, and lost

Colorado despite leading in the polls by as much as 20 points, devoting more time and money to the state than Santorum. His campaign-ending rally in Denver was attended by only two dozen people, according to one press report.

Before Tuesday, Santorum had won the fewest votes and collected the least money of the four candidates, trailing not only Romney, the media-proclaimed frontrunner, but also Gingrich and Texas congressman Ron Paul. His campaign was sustained largely by the financial backing of a single billionaire, mutual fund investor Foster Freiss, who has given millions to the Red, White and Blue Fund, a pro-Santorum super PAC.

Gingrich has likewise been sustained by one super-rich individual, casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, who had not yet declared whether he would add to the \$11 million his family has already funneled into the former House speaker's campaign.

Romney's super PAC, the Restore Our Future fund, has spent more than \$30 million, largely on attack ads against Gingrich, more money than Romney's official campaign structure has spent.

Big money is equally influential on the other half of the corporate-controlled two-party system, the Democratic Party. On February 6, White House aides announced that Obama had decided to reverse his previous hands-off posture towards the super PAC set up by a group of former campaign aides, called Priorities USA Action, and to encourage donations from wealthy supporters.

While Obama and Vice President Joe Biden will not make fundraising appearances for Priorities USA, cabinet officials and top campaign aides will be authorized to do so. The Obama campaign had previously kept a public distance from Priorities USA, in keeping with Obama's rhetorical opposition to the Supreme Court decision in the 2010 *Citizens United* case, which legalized such vehicles for corporate bribery of politicians.

Last year, Priorities USA Action raised \$4.1 million, much less than the pro-Republican super PAC headed by former Bush political aide Karl Rove, which has amassed over \$50 million, as well as the amounts raised by super PACs for Romney, Gingrich and Texas governor Rick Perry.

However, on Wednesday, Harold Ickes, president of Priorities USA Action, told the Center for Public

Integrity that it would be teaming up with four other pro-Democratic Party super PACs to aggressively solicit multi-million dollar donations from the top corporate backers of Obama. Priorities USA has said it has an aim of raising at least \$100 million this year.

Overall, the Obama reelection campaign and the Democratic National Committee raised \$224 million last year, towards a goal of breaking the record of \$745 million set by Obama during the 2008 campaign.



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