

## **CHAPTER 14**

### ***THE BEST PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES EVER***

The 2008 presidential caucuses and primaries were the most democratic and participatory ever conducted. That was as true for the Republican contest, although to nowhere near as great an extent, as for the Democratic match up. At no time in United States political history had so many states held relevant caucuses and primaries in which citizens' votes were actually helping to determine the eventual party nominees. Voter participation levels and voter interest had never been so high.

The Democratic contest was staggering in its length, in the number of voters participating, and the amount of money spent. A total of 153 days, exactly five months, went by between the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, and the final South Dakota and Montana primaries on June 3, 2008. Hillary Clinton had campaigned 500 days since first announcing her candidacy. Barack Obama had spent 479 days on the campaign trail since first getting in the race. Over 35 million persons voted in those Democratic caucuses and primaries in which there was an official vote count. On radio and television advertising alone, Hillary Clinton spent more than \$47 million. Incredibly, Barack Obama almost doubled that amount when he spent upward of \$84 million on radio and TV.

#### **THE REPUBLICANS**

In all the excitement over the lengthy and hard-fought Democratic struggle, little attention was paid to the Republican contest. Although John McCain had the nomination wrapped up by Super-Duper Tuesday, many more states than usual participated in his selection. There were six Republican caucuses and primaries prior to Super-Duper Tuesday, and then 22 states voted on the one big day that was Super-Duper Tuesday. That made a total of about 28 states, more than half the total of all 50 states, that had a meaningful role to play in the selection of the designated Republican nominee.

The two maverick states in 2008, Michigan and Florida, were downgraded in the Democratic Party but played key roles in the Republican contest.

Mitt Romney's victory in Michigan established him as a viable conservative candidate following his second-place finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire. That was important, because Romney subsequently split

the conservative Republican vote with Mike Huckabee, who had emerged by winning the Iowa caucuses. John McCain triumphed when Romney and Huckabee split the conservative vote and McCain, with his strong moderate and independent support, was able to win the key South Carolina primary in a three-way race.

Florida's unauthorized Republican primary was important because it was scheduled only one week prior to Super-Duper Tuesday. When John McCain won Florida, again in a three-way race with Romney and Huckabee splitting the conservative vote, the victory gave McCain a great surge of momentum going into the Super-Duper Tuesday voting, which was where McCain locked up the nomination.

The 2008 Republican caucuses and primary contest would have been a big deal but for the fact that the elongated and hard-fought Democratic struggle was a much bigger deal.

#### **THE DEMOCRATS**

Much occurred in the Democratic nominating process in 2008 that was unusual and unprecedented:

\* For the first time, the Rules and Bylaws Committee of the national Democratic Party attempted to designate the particular states that would be allowed to hold caucuses or primaries prior to Super-Duper Tuesday. Nevada and South Carolina were added to Iowa and New Hampshire, the two traditional early-voting states.

\* Two populous states, Michigan and Florida, moved to upset the Rules and Bylaws Committee's apportionment by scheduling primaries prior to Super-Duper Tuesday *in spite of the threatened penalty of losing their delegates to the Democratic National Convention*. Ironically, Michigan and Florida had a bigger impact on the Republican race than the Democratic.

\* The South Carolina Democratic primary, created by the Rules and Bylaws Committee, became one of the most critical events in the Hillary Clinton-Barack Obama race for the Democratic nomination. The rules committee included South Carolina because the state has a large number of African-American voters participating in the Democratic primary. "The big dog got off the porch" when Hillary Clinton's husband, former-President Bill Clinton, overplayed the race issue, thereby driving a

substantial portion of the African-American vote from Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama. This set the stage for Barack Obama, on the strength of his African-American support in the South, to win a number of key southern states, such as North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. This strong southern black vote was a key element in Barack Obama winning the nomination.

\* For the first time since the old southern Super Tuesday was created in 1988, a nominating race in either party went past the day that had evolved into Super-Duper Tuesday. Clearly, the Rules and Bylaws Committee of the Democratic Party had not anticipated such a development, because the committee made no provisions for or changes in the after-Super-Duper Tuesday caucuses and primary schedule. Another victim of believing the contest would be over on Super-Duper Tuesday was Hillary Clinton, who spent almost all of her campaign money prior to that big day and had few resources left to commit to winning the ensuing caucuses and primaries.

\* There was a significant increase in 2008 in the number of Iowa-style presidential caucuses. These caucuses, almost always held at 7 P.M. in the evening, tend to exclude swing-shift workers and parents with small children who cannot afford a babysitter. These low turn-out caucuses favor more liberal candidates in the Democratic Party and more conservative candidates in the Republican Party. One of the key elements in Barack Obama's victory over Hillary Clinton was delegates won by Obama in the large number of states holding Iowa-style caucuses. Hillary Clinton won 19 primaries and only 3 *caucuses*. Barack Obama won 18 primaries and 14 *caucuses*.

\* Barack Obama had the good fortune that, immediately following Super-Duper Tuesday, he was able to win 11 straight caucuses and primaries in states where the demographics were favorable to him. No one planned or schemed for this to happen. It was simply the accidental chance result of 11 different states deciding to schedule their caucuses and primaries when they did.

\* Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton ran such a close race in the 2008 Democratic presidential caucuses and primaries that, for the

first time in caucuses and primary history, the 800 or so superdelegates made the final decision between the two candidates. Previously, the designated nominee was chosen in the presidential caucuses and primaries and the superdelegates merely cast a confirming vote at the national convention. Another key reason Hillary Clinton lost the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama was that the superdelegates voted strongly for Barack Obama rather than Hillary Clinton.

\* The most unusual aspect of the 2008 Democratic Party nomination race was the almost even demographic split that developed in the Democratic electorate. Working-class white voters, women voters, and Hispanics lined up solidly behind Hillary Clinton. Upscale and well-educated white voters plus African-American voters went strongly for Barack Obama. It was this even demographic split, more than any other factor, that created the unending series of Democratic caucuses and primaries in 2008 that lasted through all 50 states, the territories (Guam, Puerto Rico, etc.), and the District of Columbia.

\* Ironically, the Democratic contest ended with the winning candidate, Barack Obama, retreating from the campaign. Obama essentially stopped running hard against Hillary Clinton after the Pennsylvania primary and let his momentum and popularity with the superdelegates carry him to victory. The race thus ended with Hillary Clinton, the loser, scoring late victories in such important states as West Virginia and Kentucky.

\* When all the voting was over, it became clear that the losing candidate, Hillary Clinton, had won primary elections in the six most populous states in the United States. Those states were California, New York, Texas, Florida, Michigan, and Ohio. It was unprecedented for a candidate to win so many primaries in so many heavily-populated states and *not* win the nomination.

The Democratic contest in 2008 was a presidential nomination race for the ages. The chances of it ever happening again in future contests were remote.