

## CHAPTER 5

### NEVADA

Nevada enjoys the distinction of being the first state to ever hold a presidential caucus or primary that was ordered up by a national political party rather than being the result of the state's own action.

The three states with established positions at the beginning of the presidential nomination process, that is Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina for the Republicans, got there because their own governors and state legislatures worked hard and manipulated the system to get them there. That was not the case with Nevada. It came to have an early presidential caucus in 2008 because the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee specifically picked it for the early going.

It was pretty obvious why the Rules Committee chose Nevada as one of the states to hold caucuses or a primary prior to the February 5, 2008, Super Duper Tuesday avalanche of voting. Westerners had long criticized the early portion of the nominating process for neglecting the West, and Nevada certainly qualified as a western state. Another complaint was that the nominating system left out minority groups, and 14 percent of Nevada's voters are of Hispanic origin.

There was speculation that one factor in the selection of Nevada for an early presidential caucus was the candidacy for the Democratic nomination of Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico. As a westerner and a Hispanic, Richardson needed a western state close to New Mexico with a significant Hispanic population that he could win. Nevada filled the bill perfectly for Richardson and his supporters on the Rules Committee.

Why was Nevada assigned a presidential *caucuses* rather than a *primary*. That was to get around New Hampshire's law that New Hampshire must hold the first presidential primary. The Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee originally scheduled the Nevada caucuses five days after the Iowa caucuses and three days before the New Hampshire primary. The committee hoped that, by calling the voting in Nevada a caucus rather than a primary, New Hampshire would accept two states, Iowa and Nevada, voting before New Hampshire did.

It will never be known whether New Hampshire politicians would have accepted *two* presidential caucuses being held prior to the New

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Hampshire primary. Michigan stepped into the fray, scheduled its primary prior to New Hampshire, and that forced Iowa and New Hampshire both to move their caucuses and primary dates forward well ahead of Nevada. In the end, Nevada was the only state that actually voted on the specific date, Saturday, January 19, 2008, assigned to it by the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee.

As is often the case, the Republicans tagged along with the Democrats and scheduled their presidential caucuses in Nevada on the same date.

When the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee arbitrarily selected Nevada for an early caucuses, the committee selected a state that had never previously held a meaningful presidential caucuses or primary. There was no past history of caucuses and primaries in Nevada to study and thus make educated guesses about how the state might vote, in either the Democratic or the Republican caucuses, in 2008.

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At first glance, the Democratic caucuses in Nevada looked like a fairly easy win for Hillary Clinton, a U.S. senator from New York and wife of former president Bill Clinton. She clearly was better known across the country than Barack Obama, a U.S. senator from Illinois, particularly in view of the fact that Nevada was half a continent away from Illinois. There also were very few black voters in Nevada to provide an electoral base for Obama, who was an African-American. In addition, Hillary Clinton had been the big winner in the previous Democratic presidential primary, which had been held in New Hampshire eleven days earlier.

Suddenly the situation in Nevada became less favorable for Hillary Clinton. There was speculation that Nevada's substantial contingent of Hispanic voters, being minorities themselves, might look favorably on the presidential prospects of a fellow minority, Barack Obama, who was of African descent. Then, in a major blow to the Clinton campaign, the largest labor union in Nevada, Culinary Workers Union Local 226, endorsed Obama.

Although the national image of Nevada is vast empty deserts with no human beings in sight, Nevada is one of the most urbanized states in the United States. More than 80 percent of the state's citizens live in only

two major metropolitan areas, Las Vegas and Reno. Furthermore, Nevada is the fastest-growing state in the United States in terms of population, with large numbers of new citizens moving in from other states, many of them of Hispanic descent. Of course the most famous part of Nevada is the immense gambling casinos in Las Vegas and Reno, with their acres of slot machines and other gaming devices. Gigantic hotel, restaurant, and entertainment facilities support the gambling.

Which is why Barack Obama's endorsement by the Culinary Workers Union was such a critical event prior to the Nevada Democratic caucuses. The waitresses, housekeepers, bellhops, and other service personnel who do the routine work of keeping the casinos going are the foot soldiers of Nevada's biggest industry. The Culinary Workers Union has 60,000 members, of whom more than 40 percent are Hispanic. As one union member put it: "This state is all glitz and glamour, and we are the people who stand behind the glitz and glamour."

Hillary Clinton backers feared that the Culinary Workers Union endorsement of Barack Obama would inspire a major shift of many union members in the state to Obama. Also, because so many union members were Hispanic, the union endorsement might swing Hispanics to Obama. Suddenly, the Culinary Workers Union had given Barack Obama a real chance of defeating Hillary Clinton in Nevada.

The depth of Clinton supporters' concerns became obvious when an usual law suit was filed in the U.S. Court in Nevada. In an effort to make it easier for casino workers, many of whom work on Saturday, to attend their caucus, the Nevada Democratic Party adopted a rule permitting caucuses to be staged in nine big casinos located on the Las Vegas Strip, that famous street of giant casino hotels. Ordinarily party members attend precinct caucuses in their neighborhoods close to where they live, but that would have prevented many of the casino workers, most of whom were in the Culinary Workers Union, from participating if they were working that Saturday.

The nine casino caucuses had been approved by the Nevada state Democratic Party and confirmed by the Democratic National Committee. Forces allied with Hillary Clinton filed the suit in U.S. Court in an effort

to get rid of the casino caucuses and thereby make it harder for Culinary Union members to get to their caucuses and vote for Obama.

The suit was for nought. On the Thursday prior to the Saturday voting, a U.S. judge ruled the casino caucuses could be held. Precinct caucuses are political party business, not government business, the judge said, and therefore the party rules providing for the nine casino caucuses should stand.

The Nevada caucuses were held in the late morning on Saturday, January 19, 2008. Polls showed Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in a close race. As long lines began to form at one of the nine casino caucuses locations in Las Vegas, television cameras zeroed in on a group of women waiting to vote. They all sported T-shirts emblazoned with the words: "I love my labor union, but I'm voting for Hillary Clinton!"

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Nevada Republicans had some bad luck where South Carolina Republicans were concerned. Proud of holding the first Republican primary in the South, the Republicans in South Carolina also chose Saturday, January 19, 2008, for their presidential primary. Nevada thus was forced to share its Republican caucuses day with an important Republican primary in another state. That somewhat reduced the news coverage of the Nevada caucuses and thereby somewhat diminished their significance. As it turned out, January 19, 2008, was the only day prior to Super Duper Tuesday that two states held caucuses and primaries. It was a "double-day," if not a "mega-day."

Thus *compression* was a major factor in the Nevada Republican caucuses. The Michigan primary, which seriously involved only the Republican candidates for president, had been held only four days earlier on Tuesday, January 15, 2008. For the Republicans, there were only three full days to campaign, on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, between Michigan and Nevada. Things were further jammed up for the Republicans by South Carolina's Republicans voting the same day as Nevada.

The Republican caucuses in Nevada ended up in the middle of a *compression* sandwich. In many ways, the Nevada Republican presidential caucuses were lost in the shuffle. The *New York Times* referred to

them as “the lost contest.”

Essentially what happened was the two leading contenders for the Republican nomination, former-Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona, divided up the pie. John McCain decided to concentrate his time, effort, and money on winning the South Carolina Republican primary, where the polls showed McCain in the lead. On the other hand, Mitt Romney canceled his TV ads in South Carolina and pulled up stakes and went to campaign exclusively in Nevada.

Mitt Romney had good reasons to cast his lot with the Nevada caucuses. Although Romney’s Mormon religion cost him votes in Iowa, where there were large numbers of anti-Mormon evangelical Christians at the Republican caucuses, such would not be the situation in Nevada. The state originally was founded by Mormons, and large numbers of Mormons live in Nevada. Most important, many Nevadans know and work with Mormons in their daily lives and regard them as full-fledged members of the community. Nevadans of all religions have a record of voting Mormons into political office. The most notable Mormon representing Nevada in Congress in 2008 was Harry Reid, a Democrat and the majority leader in the U.S. Senate.

The Romney campaign criticized John McCain and the other Republican candidates for bypassing Nevada. It was pointed out that Nevada had more delegates to the Republican National Convention than South Carolina. Also, this was a tight three-way race between Romney, McCain, and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas. The Romney forces argued any candidate who neglected such an important state with a relatively sizeable pot of delegates was “doing it at their own peril.”

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Although the polls said the race would be close, Hillary Clinton defeated Barack Obama in the Nevada caucuses by a substantial margin. Clinton carried almost all major categories of voters. Most embarrassing for Obama, Clinton won nearly two-thirds of the Hispanic vote, thus demonstrating that Obama’s African-American heritage had little appeal to Hispanic voters.

As in New Hampshire, Hillary Clinton was particularly popular with women voters and white voters. Obama showed strength with the relatively small number of black voters in Nevada, who gave 80 percent of their support to Obama. The Illinois senator, as he had been doing in the previous caucuses and primaries, carried younger voters by a two to one margin. Clinton won the support of older voters, however, who turned out to the caucuses in much larger numbers than voters under 30 years old.

Nevada was a big victory for Hillary Clinton, coming as it did after her upset win over Barack Obama in New Hampshire. Clinton now had won two in a row over Obama, in New Hampshire and Nevada, and she thereby had taken some of the glow off Obama's big win in the Iowa caucuses.

In the Republican caucuses, Mitt Romney was the winner. His fellow Mormons turned out in strength to vote for him. Almost half his support came from Mormons. A major surprise was evangelical Christians. Expected to go for Mike Huckabee, a fellow evangelical Christian, the evangelical Christians in Nevada gave 40 percent of their votes to Romney and only 25 percent to Huckabee. Romney also won the support of Nevadans who served in the military, a group that was expected to rally around John McCain, the former Navy pilot who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Both Hillary Clinton and Mitt Romney profited greatly from the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee designating Nevada for an early caucuses. Thanks to Nevada, both could claim two wins in a row. Clinton won in New Hampshire and Nevada, and Romney triumphed in Michigan and Nevada. Both showed themselves to be well-financed candidates with broad appeal to a wide variety of voter groups. In a way most observers had not expected, Nevada gave a good portion of its world-famous "glitz and glamour" to Hillary Clinton and Mitt Romney.