

CHAPTER 7

SOUTH CAROLINA FOR THE DEMOCRATS

The 2008 presidential caucuses and primaries touched on three of the more delicate subjects in United States politics.

The issue of *religious toleration* came up in connection with Republican candidate Mitt Romney, whose Mormon religion was said to clash with the beliefs of evangelical Christians and thus cost Romney votes in the Iowa caucuses.

The issue of *gender* loomed large in the New Hampshire primary, when Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton had her “Moment” of coming almost to tears and subsequently made gains among older white women voters.

The issue of *race* began to emerge in the runup to the South Carolina Democratic primary. Hillary Clinton and her husband, former-President Bill Clinton, were accused of making comments that sought to portray her major opponent for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama, as “the black candidate.”

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Similar to Nevada, the South Carolina Democratic presidential primary was brand-new for 2008. Since 1980, South Carolina Republicans held an early primary, and it became famous as the “First Republican primary in the South.” South Carolina Democrats, on the other hand, left their primary late on the caucuses/primary calendar, where it attracted little or no attention and was usually held after the party nominee had been determined in earlier caucuses and primaries.

Also similar to Nevada, South Carolina’s early Democratic primary was the result of designation by the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee rather than the actions of South Carolina state Democratic leaders. The major reason for adding South Carolina to the list of early Democratic caucuses and primaries was that South Carolina has a significant African-American population. Prior to 2008, the quaint United States nominating system of state caucuses and primaries was roundly criticized for under representing minorities such as blacks and Hispanics.

The Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee originally scheduled the South Carolina Democratic presidential primary for

***SOUTH CAROLINA
FOR THE DEMOCRATS***

89

Tuesday, January 29, 2008. The state legislature of Florida, however, picked that date for Florida's "unauthorized" presidential primary. South Carolina Democrats, fearing their state's primary would be completely overshadowed if held on the same day as populous Florida, moved the South Carolina primary forward three days to Saturday, January 26, 2008. That was exactly one week after Hillary Clinton scored her convincing victory over Barack Obama in the Nevada caucuses on Saturday, January 19, 2008.

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The race issue first began to simmer in the Democratic presidential race when Hillary Clinton, during a television interview, tried to make the point that Barack Obama's grand promise of "change" for the United States would require political skill and governmental experience to be achieved. Clinton used the example of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the congressional law that outlawed racial discrimination in restaurants, hotels, motels, swimming pools, and similar places of public accommodations in the United States. The efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., in leading the Civil Rights Movement would not have amounted to much, Hillary Clinton seemed to be saying, if President Lyndon Johnson had not possessed the political knowledge and the Capitol Hill influence to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed by Congress and signed into law.

African-American political leaders in South Carolina immediately took exception to Hillary Clinton's comment. They charged that Hillary Clinton demeaned and downgraded the contribution of Martin Luther King, Jr., to ending racial discrimination in the United States. The Obama campaign then accused Hillary Clinton of intentionally raising the race issue with the remark in hopes of uniting white voters behind her candidacy and against Obama, an African-American.

This raising of the race issue was occurring in South Carolina, a state where at least 50 percent or more of the voters in the Democratic presidential primary were expected to be African-American. There was speculation in the news media that Hillary Clinton was subtly letting Barack Obama win South Carolina with its large black vote, but she was playing up his race because she calculated that would help her in the 20-plus Super-Duper Tuesday states, voting 10 days later, where most of the voters would be white.

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Another aspect of the Hillary Clinton campaign leading up to the South Carolina primary was the use of her husband, the former president, as a surrogate campaigner. Following her third-place finish in the Iowa caucuses, Hillary Clinton sent her husband out to the hustings and gave him the job of attacking Senator Barack Obama's voting record. Bill Clinton's most famous charge was that Obama's claim that he had always opposed the war in Iraq was a "fairy tale." The Clinton campaign was quite frank in saying that former-President Clinton was playing "bad cop" to Hillary Clinton's "good cop." He was dishing the dirt on Obama while she was playing the role of the "stateswoman" above the fray.

Many commentators found Bill Clinton's aggressive politicking against Barack Obama to be "overdone" and "meanspirited." Suddenly there was widespread speculation in the press that the dynamic and garrulous former president was overshadowing his wife and giving the impression that he, and not she, would be running the country if Hillary Clinton were elected president. There was fear of a "co-presidency," something that most observers did not want from the Clintons.

One commentator said that Hillary Clinton failed "to keep the big dog on the porch" and Bill Clinton was running loose and harming her campaign. The *Denver Post* referred to the couple as "Billary," described the former president as "Surrogate-In-Chief," and made it clear this "two-for-the-price-of-one" deal was not wanted. The *New York Post* expressed disapproval of these campaign antics by labeling Hillary and Bill Clinton "the two-headed monster."

The Barack Obama forces fought back against the double onslaught of Hillary and Bill Clinton, mainly by charging that such negative campaigning was unseemly for a former chief executive of the United States. "This is not just a spouse or an average surrogate," said David Plouffe, who was Obama's campaign manager. "He's a former president, and I think that comes with a little higher responsibility about what he says and how he says it."

The growing bitterness between the Clinton and Obama camps overflowed into a television debate between the two candidates held in

***SOUTH CAROLINA
FOR THE DEMOCRATS***

91

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, during the week before the primary. Hillary Clinton started the verbal fireworks by saying: "It is very difficult having a straight-up debate with you because you don't take responsibility for any vote." This comment elicited loud jeers from the audience. For his part, Barack Obama commented on both Hillary and Bill Clinton leveling charges at him: "I can't tell who I'm running against sometimes."

John Edwards, the third candidate participating in the Democratic debate in Myrtle Beach, derided the constant sniping between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama by jibing: "What I was trying to do was represent the grown-up wing of the Democratic Party."

At times the charges exchanged by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the debate seemed petty. He accused her of being anti-labor union because she served as a director at Wal-Mart, a giant retailer with a reputation for resisting unionization. Hillary Clinton retorted that Barack Obama had worked for a slum lord in Chicago.

The idea that Hillary Clinton was giving up on South Carolina and its heavy African-American vote seemed to be confirmed when she left the state for a few days to campaign and raise money in Arizona, California, New Jersey, and New Mexico. All four were states that would be voting 10 days after South Carolina on Super Duper Tuesday. Hillary Clinton left her husband behind her in South Carolina, however, to continue to blitz Barack Obama with negative attacks.

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It was in this heavy atmosphere of charge and countercharge that South Carolina Democrats went to the polls on Saturday, January 26, 2008. The Clinton campaign's fears about losing the state were justified. Barack Obama won South Carolina in a landslide, piling up many more votes than even the most optimistic observers expected. Barack Obama racked up 55 percent of the vote to Hillary Clinton's 27 percent. Obama doubled the Clinton tally. John Edwards, the former-U.S. senator from North Carolina, came in third with only 18 percent and dropped out of the race shortly thereafter.

It was a must-win for Barack Obama, and he delivered it in a very convincing manner. Obama had not won a caucuses or primary since his “First-In-The-Nation” triumph in Iowa. By winning South Carolina so overwhelmingly, he revived his campaign and went into the Super Duper Tuesday battle against Hillary Clinton on an equal footing with her.

Hillary Clinton’s giant loss in South Carolina confirmed in many observers’ minds the conviction that Bill Clinton’s negative campaigning had badly hurt his wife’s political image and cost her voter support among white voters as well as black voters. The Barack Obama forces were quick to take advantage of what clearly had been the most negative week in the Democratic race so far. This was “a sound rejection of the politics of attack and division by the voters of South Carolina,” said David Plouffe, Obama’s campaign manager.

The week that culminated in the South Carolina Democratic presidential primary proved disastrous for the Hillary Clinton campaign. Even after her big loss to Barack Obama in the voting, the news media continued to criticize her and her husband’s negative campaigning. Hillary seemed to be calling off the “Big Dog” as Bill Clinton diminished his campaigning for her and reduced the attacks on Barack Obama.

As for Obama, he did not just win in South Carolina. He came out of the state with tons of momentum and his opponent’s reputation severely tarnished.