

CHAPTER 8

FLORIDA

Florida first emerged on the presidential primary scene in 1988, when it was one of the southern states that participated in the first-ever Super Tuesday. Four years later, in 1992, Florida was propelled to the front rank of important primary states when the news media selected it for the final showdown between Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas and former-U.S. Senator Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts.

In the 1992 race for the Democratic nomination for president, Paul Tsongas got off to a fast start by winning the New Hampshire primary. Tsongas next won the Maryland primary, but that same day Bill Clinton swept to victory in the southern state of Georgia. The two candidates thus were running neck and neck when they faced off against one another in Florida on the second Tuesday in March.

Although located in the South and one of the states that seceded from the Union during the American Civil War, Florida is not considered a typical southern state by voting-behavior analysts. The major reason for this is the large number of former northern voters who have moved to South Florida, either to retire or to enjoy the outdoor lifestyle of one of the fastest-growing states in the nation.

These former northerners were viewed as ripe targets for the Paul Tsongas campaign. His heavy Massachusetts accent would not sound quite so strange to them, and his New Hampshire and Maryland primary victories already had demonstrated his strong appeal to people from the northern part of the nation. Furthermore, in the 1988 presidential election, Florida had voted for Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, like Tsongas a Greek from Massachusetts.

A state Democratic Party official summed up the presence of northerners in Florida this way: "The saying here is, the more south you go, the further north you are."

In the 1992 race in Florida, both Paul Tsongas and Bill Clinton concentrated their campaigning on the many retirement complexes found throughout the state. Bill Clinton, for instance, courted older voters the Friday before election day at a large waterfront retirement community in Tampa. The next day, Paul Tsongas met with the residents, many of them retired, of a large condominium on Collins Avenue in Miami

Beach. The Monday before election day, Bill Clinton's wife Hillary campaigned through a number of retirement condominiums in the north Miami Beach and Pompano Beach areas.

Retirement complexes are particularly desirable places to campaign in Florida because retired people have a great deal of spare time on their hands and enjoy attending political events. Furthermore, retirement facilities have comfortable lobby areas or, in the case of larger facilities, big assembly halls that make convenient and inexpensive places to hold candidate rallies.

Bill Clinton and Paul Tsongas spent so much time campaigning in the large retirement condominiums that stretch up Florida's east coast from Miami Beach through Fort Lauderdale to Palm Beach that reporters began referring to "the condo wars" of South Florida.

Century Village is a typical retirement community in south Florida. Located in the small city of Deerfield Beach near Fort Lauderdale, it is a low density apartment-style development that sprawls over acres and acres of landscaped grounds. Thousands of elderly persons, singles and couples, have resettled from all over the United States to this spacious and relaxing "senior city." Century Village is so large it has three separate community recreation centers to serve the social needs of its elderly residents.

On the Monday night before primary election day in 1992, the Century Village Democratic Club held its regular monthly meeting in the auditorium of one of the recreation centers. Over 300 residents gathered to hear U.S. Representative Joseph Kennedy of Massachusetts give a speech in behalf of Paul Tsongas. Joe Kennedy, the nephew of former President John F. Kennedy and the son of former attorney general and U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy, was staying at the nearby Kennedy winter home in Palm Beach and doing some surrogate campaigning in Florida for Tsongas.

One of the officers of the Century Village Democratic Club began the somewhat lengthy process of calling the meeting to order and introducing Representative Kennedy. The accent of the man doing the introductions was unmistakably New York. So, it seemed was almost everyone else's accent in the audience that night. One man in his seventies volunteered that, for more than 40 years, he and the man introducing

Joseph Kennedy had served together on the same Democratic Party Central Committee in New York City.

Those who bothered to listen closely to the introduction learned that Bill Clinton had personally attended and addressed a previous meeting of the Century Village Democratic Club. Supporters of Paul Tsongas complained about this show of favoritism to Clinton and demanded that Tsongas be invited to speak at a subsequent meeting. The night before election day was offered, but Tsongas had a previous engagement, thus necessitating Joe Kennedy's appearance as a celebrity replacement. One got the distinct impression that only the necessity to give equal time to all the candidates that requested it had led the leadership of the Century Village Democratic Club to give any exposure at all to the Tsongas campaign.

Joseph Kennedy gave an entertaining, workmanlike speech that March evening in Florida. He warmed up his audience with marvelous stories of the Kennedy family life that he experienced while growing up. He related Tsongas's underdog campaign for the presidency in 1992 to his uncle John Kennedy's well-known underdog campaign for the presidency in 1960.

The entire time Joseph Kennedy was speaking, however, well-dressed young men in suit coats and ties stood at various places around the auditorium holding up "Bill Clinton for President" signs. The youthful appearance and more formal dress of the Clinton workers caused them to stand out in contrast to the obvious age and casual clothing of the residents of Century Village. Two of the Clinton sign holders stood at each side of the stage, even while Kennedy was speaking, not waving their Clinton signs but making certain they were plainly visible to everyone in their half of the auditorium. No southern hospitality here. This was "in your face" politics New York style!

By the time it was all over, Paul Tsongas night at the Century Village Democratic Club ended up seeming a great deal more like a second Bill Clinton night. It was true that Tsongas had an excellent surrogate speaker in Joseph Kennedy, but it was very obvious that Bill Clinton had by far the better organization, both at Century Village and, by implication,

throughout the state of Florida.

In a state as populous as Florida, television advertising becomes much more important than person-to-person campaigning. The Clinton organization flooded prime-time television in Florida with negative ads against Tsongas that described him as the enemy of increased Social Security benefits. The anti-Social Security charges were thought to be particularly damaging to Tsongas in a state with such a high percentage of retired residents living on Social Security.

Primary election day in Florida in 1992 dawned sunny, cool, and breezy in South Florida. The good weather guaranteed a good turnout at the polls. Election night found the two major candidates for the Democratic nomination far away from Florida. Bill Clinton was campaigning in Illinois, which was scheduled to hold its Democratic primary one week later. Paul Tsongas flew home to Massachusetts, which was voting the same day as Florida. In Massachusetts, a primary victory for Tsongas was assured.

The Clinton and Tsongas campaign organizations both held their election night celebrations at hotels close to the Miami airport. That made it extra easy for out-of-state news personnel to fly in and cover the election-night festivities. The Tsongas celebration was at a Howard Johnson's Hotel in Miami Beach, just a few miles down the expressway from the airport. The most notable thing about the Tsongas party was that many of the conversations were in Greek rather than English. Tsongas's fellow Greek-Americans in the Miami area had turned out to support him, win or lose. In addition, someone had turned out an ample supply of delicious Greek pastries.

Unfortunately for the Paul Tsongas campaigners, the Greek pastries were the only thing sweet about this particular election night. The many television sets scattered around the Tsongas suite at the Howard Johnson's Hotel reported miserable news. Bill Clinton was winning Florida with more than 50 percent of the vote. Tsongas was trailing 15 percentage points behind at the 35 percent level. Tsongas, who at one point thought he just might win in Florida, did not even come in a "close" second.

The quiet bilingual conversations at the Tsongas election night gathering stood in sharp contrast to the exuberant celebration at the Clinton party at the Miami Airport Hilton. Hundreds of Clinton supporters cheered wildly as each incoming election report indicated that Bill Clinton was rolling to a blow-out win in Florida. The bar at the hotel's Club Mystique was jammed with Clinton supporters arguing over just how decisive Clinton's victory had been. "I think it's all over with," speculated Bill Mauk, Clinton's Miami area campaign chairman. "Tsongas's money will all start drying up." Hugh Rodham, the brother of Clinton's wife, Hillary, and an assistant public defender in Miami, expanded on the point. "Paul Tsongas put all his time and money in this race, and he lost. He fell flat on his face. He wanted to make a stand in Florida and you can see what happened."

Because Florida is more than just another southern state, Lieutenant Governor Buddy MacKay, Clinton's state chairman, saw Clinton's big victory in Florida in 1992 as proof that Clinton could win anywhere in the United States, not just in the South. MacKay explained:

"The condos in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Palm Beach are northeastern U.S. We know that you've got the Middle West living on our West Coast. In Orlando, you've got a conglomeration of everything, and North Florida is still the South. Clinton won them all. This is kind of a pilot project on whether you can run all over America."

Bill Clinton's big victory over Paul Tsongas in Florida in 1992 essentially guaranteed Bill Clinton the Democratic nomination, and he went on from there to win the presidency over incumbent Republican George H. W. Bush. It was Florida's last moment in the presidential primary spotlight for the next few years, however. More aggressive states jumped ahead of Florida in 1996, 2000, and 2004, and the Sunshine State played no role in either the Democratic or the Republican nomination race in those years.

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In 2008 the Republican-dominated state legislature in Florida decided that the state was going to have an early presidential primary, no matter what the two national political parties might have to say about it. The

Republicans outmaneuvered the Democrats in Florida by putting the early presidential primary date in a bill that included election reforms, which the Democrats felt constrained to support. The new date was Tuesday, January 29, 2008, exactly one week prior to the February 5, 2008, Super-Duper Tuesday. Florida's Republican governor signed the bill into law.

Florida received the same treatment that Michigan got for having the audacity to hold an "unauthorized" presidential primary prior to Super-Duper Tuesday. The Rules Committee of the Democratic National Committee took away all of Florida's delegates to the Democratic National Convention, to be held in Denver in August of 2008. Democratic candidates were forbidden to campaign in Florida. The Republicans only took away one-half of Florida's delegates to the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis in early September, but the Republicans did allow candidates to campaign in Florida.

The result was the Republicans had a lively presidential primary in Florida in 2008 and the Democrats did not. The Democrats held a primary, and there was going to be a winner, but because there were no delegates at stake and no campaigning, the Democratic primary received minimal news coverage.

For the Republicans, however, the 2008 Florida presidential primary was huge. Because it was scheduled only one week before February 5, 2008, the Florida primary was quickly nicknamed "the gateway to Super-Duper Tuesday." The three major Republican candidates began the contest in Florida in relatively equal positions. Former-Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee had won the Iowa caucuses. Former-Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney had been victorious in the Michigan primary and the Nevada caucuses. Arizona Senator John McCain had triumphed in the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries. Polls showed all three candidates within three percentage points of each other as the campaigning for the Florida primary got underway.

To further spice things up, there was a fourth major candidate in the Florida Republican competition. Former-Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York City, who had bypassed all the previous caucuses and primaries,

decided to plunk down all his chips on the Florida primary, win there, and ride the resulting momentum into a big victory on Super Duper-Tuesday one week later. This strategy was aided by the fact that three of the states voting on Super-Duper Tuesday - New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut - are in the New York metropolitan area. Giuliani, as former-mayor of New York City, was well-known in all three of those states and planned to win them after taking Florida.

Nationwide public-opinion polls, taken late in 2007 before the caucuses and primaries began, consistently identified Rudy Giuliani as the most popular of the Republican candidates for president. As the caucuses and primaries started taking place in early January of 2008, however, Giuliani's poll numbers began to fall. The poll numbers of the other three Republican candidates began to go up as each of them won a caucus in this state or a primary in that state. By the time it was two weeks before the Florida primary, Rudy Giuliani was polling at the same level as the other three Republican candidates.

So the news media began to cast the Florida Republican primary as mainly a contest between John McCain and Mitt Romney. Giuliani was written off for his falling status in the public-opinion polls, and Mike Huckabee was seen as non-competitive because he lacked the money to compete effectively in a state as populous as Florida with such high campaigning costs.

John McCain and Mitt Romney apparently agreed with the news media that Florida had boiled down to a two-candidate race. They attacked each other bitterly both on the campaign trail and in television advertisements. Mitt Romney accused John McCain of voting with liberal Democrats in the Senate on such issues as immigration, the environment, and campaign finance. Then Romney harkened back to an issue that had worked well for him in his victory in the Michigan primary. He accused John McCain of lacking the knowledge and experience of the business world to deal effectively with the current softening of the United States economy.

For his part, John McCain charged Mitt Romney with having at one time supported a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

McCain said such an action would guarantee the defeat of the United States both in Iraq and in the war on terrorism. McCain described Romney as a serial flip-flopper. “He has been entirely consistent,” McCain said of Romney. “He has consistently taken two sides of every major issue, sometimes more than two.”

A major event the weekend before primary election day was John McCain’s endorsement by two leading Florida Republicans, U.S. Senator Mel Martinez and state Governor Charlie Crist. The support of these two “party regulars” was considered very significant for McCain. In his two previous primary victories, in New Hampshire and South Carolina, McCain mainly won with the support of independent voters, not the registered Republican voters who tended to prefer Romney and Huckabee. In Florida, however, only registered Republicans were permitted to vote in the Republican primary. Florida thus was going to be a real test of whether or not John McCain could win where only registered members of the Republican Party had access to the ballot.

Those endorsements from Senator Martinez and Governor Crist were thought to be a good sign that “real Republicans” in Florida were trending toward McCain.

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When the votes were counted in the 2008 Florida Republican primary, John McCain narrowly defeated Mitt Romney by about 35 percent to 30 percent. Rudy Giuliani trailed badly at about 15 percent. Mike Huckabee was fourth with some 14 percent.

It was a crucial victory for McCain. He suddenly became, in the eyes of the news media, the clear frontrunner for the Republican nomination going into Super-Duper Tuesday. Mitt Romney was styled by the press as McCain’s only remaining serious competition. Giuliani and Huckabee were written off entirely. Most important, however, John McCain had proved convincingly that he could win in a state where only registered Republicans were voting.

A few days later, Rudy Giuliani, faced with the reality of his poor third-place finish in Florida, endorsed John McCain for the Republican nomination for president.

Suddenly it was John McCain, whose campaign almost went out of business six months earlier because of lack of money, who was the odds-on favorite to be the 2008 Republican nominee.

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It was little noted that another presidential primary had taken place on Tuesday, January 29, 2008, in Florida. Although there was no campaigning allowed and no delegates at stake, Hillary Clinton won the Democratic primary in the Sunshine State with about 50 percent of the vote to Barack Obama's 30 percent. Once the polls closed, Hillary Clinton flew into Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for a victory celebration in the nearby community of Davie.

Although the news media ignored the Florida Democratic primary, the political cognoscenti paid close attention. Florida was a populous state with a wide variety of voting groups. The Florida results suggested that Hillary Clinton might prove a strong candidate in some of the really populous states, such as California and New York, that were slated to vote one week later on Super-Duper Tuesday.