

THE SOUTH CAROLINA REPUBLICAN PRIMARY

by

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As in recent presidential elections, South Carolina was a crucial battleground for the Republican Party's presidential nomination. While New Hampshire has made a habit of deflating front-runners, South Carolina has propped them back up.¹ Since 1980, the state has supported every presidential front-runner. In fact, South Carolina has been referred to as the firewall, since insurgents like Pat Buchanan and Pat Robertson have seen their campaigns end with the South Carolina primary. However, this trend did not hold true for McCain.

The South Carolina Republican presidential primary is historically the first primary in the South, making it an important barometer for candidates, the media, and political analysts of southern Republican political preferences. In 2000, the state took on added importance because of insurgent John McCain's stunning 19 percentage-point victory over front-runner George Bush in New Hampshire and because Senator McCain had targeted South Carolina as the second of four states essential to his campaign—New Hampshire, South Carolina, Michigan, and Arizona. McCain's campaign believed that if he won those four contests, he could force Bush out of the race.²

South Carolina has undergone significant political change in recent years. Immigration from the Northeast and Midwest has changed the state's demography, primarily in the Piedmont section and the retirement communities along the coast. In addition, in the 1990s, \$42 billion was invested in manufacturing industries, creating 207,000 new jobs.³

This economic growth has been a boon for the state's Republican party. In 1987, Republicans held only twenty-nine of 124 seats in the state house, while in 1994, the party won a majority of the seats for the first time since Reconstruction.

While the Republican party has grown dramatically, it has also changed. The first generation of native South Carolina Republicans were hardcore economic and social conservatives. However, the northern Republicans and the second generation of home-grown Republicans are not as conservative. This became apparent in 1998 when the Democratic party regained control of the governor's office as well as three other constitutional offices.

THE CANDIDATE CAMPAIGNS

John McCain's election strategy in South Carolina was designed to attract these new Republicans, along with Independent and Democratic voters who could vote in the state's open primary. In contrast, George W. Bush emphasized conservative themes to energize the traditional economic and social conservatives in the state's Republican party. He started with an appearance at Bob Jones University, a Christian fundamentalist school in Greenville that banned interracial dating and whose leaders had once labeled the Catholic Church a "Satanic Cult."⁴ In a state where the Christian Right was estimated to be one-third of the Republican voters, the Bush strategy, coupled with the efforts of

¹ Jim Yardley and David Firestone, "Old-Line Republicans Find an Independent Streak Among the Voters," *New York Times*, 17 February 2000, A21.

² John Weaver, telephone interview by David Magleby, 14 June 2000.

³ Yardley and Firestone, "Old-Line Republicans Find an Independent Streak Among the Voters."

⁴ Glen Johnson, "Bush Regrets Bob Jones Appearance," *The State*, 28 February 2000, A1.

other groups, proved to be effective.⁵ Seventy-nine percent of Bush voters said they were Republican while 62 percent of McCain voters were not.⁶

In addition to McCain and Bush, Steve Forbes and Alan Keyes were also active in South Carolina. Forbes campaigned in South Carolina until February 9, 2000. Following his loss in the Delaware primary on February 7, he abandoned his quest after spending \$35 million. In fact, his departure was so abrupt that his commercials attacking Bush were still running on South Carolina television and radio stations after his withdrawal from the race.⁷ Despite his strong conservatism, Keyes could never get more than single-digit support in the polls, and as a result, the race came down to Bush versus McCain.

While the two front-runners ran positive campaigns in South Carolina prior to the New Hampshire primary, McCain's victory in New Hampshire quickly changed the tenor of the South Carolina race. Both candidates aired negative ads on radio and television, and their campaigns accused each other of using negative push polls to sway voters. Both trotted out high profile members of the South Carolina Republican party to appear at campaign events, to record ads and phone messages to voters, and to sign their names to campaign literature. Bush had the support of former Republican Governor Carroll Campbell, the state attorney general, several local congressmen, and numerous state legislators, including the speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives. McCain received active support from Congressmen Lindsey Graham and Mark Sanford and members of the state legislature, including the speaker pro tempore. Though many perceived Bush as the party establishment candidate nationally, McCain was able to make inroads into the state party. These divisions added to some of the rancor of the campaign.

In addition to the very visible air war, with advertising and appearances designed to attract the media, the major candidates mounted an extensive ground war to increase their support through phone banks and mailings. At least twenty-one different phone messages were sent out by the candidates' campaigns, most of them during the final two weeks of the primary battle. The Bush calls included a canvassing ad "Would You Support Bush?," a call inviting voters to meet Bush, and at least two GOTV calls. Bush also paid for recorded messages from Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL), State Attorney General Charlie Condon, and former Governor Carroll Campbell. One Bush strategist estimated that the campaign had made more than a million calls combined.⁸ McCain had at least one persuasion call and two GOTV calls. His campaign also paid for calls that targeted Democrats. In one of these, Democratic State Senator Phil Leventis called "20,000 of [his] closest friends" to ask them to vote for McCain.⁹ People who received this call and others like it claimed they had only voted in Democratic primaries in the past and could not have been on any Republican phone lists. Keyes also had one GOTV call.

Candidates also bombarded targeted voters with mail. Our network of voters turned up twenty-one different mailings paid for by the Bush campaign and thirty-one pieces paid for by McCain. In addition, McCain sent out at least fifteen e-mail messages to active supporters and people who had added their names to his subscription list. The Bush campaign maintained an e-mail tree of more than 12,000 names of people who had provided their e-mail addresses to the campaign.¹⁰ The messages distributed across this network were mostly campaign updates, press releases, schedules of where the candidate would be, news articles about the campaign, and the campaign's response to

⁵ Bob Paslay and James T. Hammond, "Upstate a Force in Bush Win," *Greenville News*, 21 February 2000, 1A.

⁶ "Exit Poll Results," *The State*, 20 February 2000, D1.

⁷ Richard L. Berke, "Forbes Exits and the Contenders Rush In," *New York Times*, 10 February 2000, A22.

⁸ Warren Tompkins, Bush Strategist, telephone interview by Danielle Vinson, 19 June 2000.

⁹ Phil Leventis, telephone interview by Bill Moore, 12 June 2000.

¹⁰ Warren Tompkins, telephone interview.

some of these. The Bush campaign made an estimated one million contacts with state voters in the final two days with direct mail, telephone calls, and radio and TV ads.¹¹

With the negative tone and the sheer volume of voter contacts and ads, the contest generated extraordinary voter interest. Pre-election projections predicted that as many as 400,000 voters would turn out.¹² The actual turnout was 565,704.¹³ In 2000, over 100,000 more voters went to the polls than in 1996 and the 2000 voter turnout nearly doubled 1992 turnout.¹⁴

CANDIDATE CAMPAIGN SPENDING

Because of the importance placed on the South Carolina primary by the candidates and the media, the amount of money spent on the Republican primary by the major candidates was inordinately high. While George Bush was not required to file a state-by-state report with the Federal Election Commission, Tucker Eskew, a spokesman for the Bush campaign, said Bush spent in the neighborhood of \$4 million in South Carolina.¹⁵ *Newsweek* and an anonymous Republican Party contact estimated that Bush spent closer to \$8 million in the state,¹⁶ and the McCain campaign staff estimated that Bush spent between \$10 to 15 million.¹⁷ South Carolina state Democratic Chairman Dick Harpootlian said, “George Bush spent \$10 a vote or more, so it shows he does live by the Golden Rule: ‘He who has the gold rules.’”¹⁸ McCain’s report to the Federal Election Commission listed his South Carolina’s expenditures at \$2,940,377. Alan Keyes spent approximately \$280,662 and Steve Forbes spent \$48,600 on advertising in the state’s major media markets.

The largest expenditures went to media advertising. In terms of the major media markets—Columbia, Charleston, Florence, and Greenville—Bush outspent McCain by an estimated \$1,681,554 to \$1,511,930, not as much as one might expect, given estimates of Bush’s overall financial advantage. Where, then, did Bush’s additional funds go? Warren Tompkins, a strategist for Bush, believed Bush might have spent more on radio than McCain, and the volume of telephone calls people received from the Bush campaign suggests that Bush also devoted substantial resources to phone contacts. Bush also probably spent more on organization. Prior to the New Hampshire victory, McCain’s campaign in South Carolina was largely made up of volunteers. He did not have large numbers of paid staff in the state until they moved from New Hampshire. Bush, however, had maintained professional staff in the state earlier.

THE INTEREST GROUP CAMPAIGNS

The candidate campaigns were supplemented by an intense, personal, and negative issue advocacy campaigns by interest groups. Nearly three-fourths (74 percent) of the issue advocacy was spent attacking or supporting candidates; only 26 percent constituted pure issue advocacy. Virtually all of this activity attacked John McCain. The interest groups used e-mail, fax, phone, mail, newspaper ads, and radio and television communications. Some have described what happened as “carpet bombing,” and state Republican Party Chairman Henry McMaster said the ground war was “like flying over a jungle; you couldn’t really tell what was going on.”

¹¹ Schuyler Kropf, “Decisive Win Boosts Momentum,” *The Post and Courier*, 20 February, 2000, 14A.

¹² “Record Turnout Being Predicted at Polls,” *Greenville News*, 19 February 2000, 1A.

¹³ Paslay and Hammond, “Upstate a Force in Bush Win.”

¹⁴ According to the South Carolina State Election Commission, voter turnout in 1996 was 436,768 and 356,289 in 1992.

¹⁵ Joseph Stroud, “South Carolina Saves Bush,” *State*, 20 February, 2000, A16.

¹⁶ “Back From the Brink,” *Newsweek*, February 28, 2000, 24.

¹⁷ Trey Walker, McCain field campaign director, telephone interview by Bill Moore, 13 June 2000.

¹⁸ Kropf, “Decisive Win Boosts Momentum.”

The interest groups involved include the National Right to Life Committee and South Carolina Citizens for Life, the Christian Coalition, the Keep It Flying PAC, the National Smokers Alliance, a number of anti-immigration groups, the English Language PAC, and Capital Watch.

Just as the candidates adopted a negative tone in South Carolina, interest groups also shifted their themes and messages from New Hampshire to South Carolina. The groups active against McCain in New Hampshire shifted their theme and message in South Carolina to a highly personal attack on McCain's character and his views on religious conservatism. In South Carolina in September 1999, representatives of the National Right to Life Committee had held a press conference with others from the Christian Coalition, Americans for Tax Reform, and the National Rifle Association to criticize McCain's position on campaign finance reform. After Bush's New Hampshire defeat, NRLC began to run radio ads throughout South Carolina questioning McCain's pro-life record and commitment. The ads talked about McCain's votes in favor of fetal-tissue research and his friendship with former Senator Warren Rudman who is pro-choice. FEC figures show that the group spent \$44,287 on radio ads plus 2,050 from the South Carolina organization. The FEC also reported that the NRLC gave \$3000 South Carolina Citizens for Life, which coordinated with the national organization on the radio ads. The director of the South Carolina organization said her group only spent \$500 on the race; everything else was the national group.

According to Holly Gatling, executive director of South Carolina Citizens for Life, the pro-life group's shift in strategy from New Hampshire to South Carolina was in response to McCain's uncertainty about how to answer a hypothetical question posed to him just before the New Hampshire primary about what he would do if his teenage daughter wanted an abortion. These seeming contradictions convinced the pro-life groups that McCain would not be strongly pro-life and reinforced their concerns about his campaign finance reforms. When it became clear after New Hampshire that the race was really between McCain and Bush, the groups decided to endorse Bush to avoid any confusion on the part of the voters about who the "real pro-life" candidate was. This coincided well with the Bush campaign's decision to energize the religious conservatives in the state.

The Christian Coalition sent a mailing that claimed McCain said he might appoint Warren Rudman as attorney general. The mailing also contained quotes from Rudman's book: "The Republican Party is making a terrible mistake if it appears to ally itself with the Christian Right." The mailing also mentioned that McCain was the only Republican candidate "who sought and received the endorsement of the Log Cabin Republicans, a pro-homosexual rights group." Lastly, the mailing raised concerns about McCain's position on abortion and campaign finance reform.

On February 10, the National Right to Life Committee and South Carolina Citizens for Life threw their support behind Bush in press conferences in South Carolina and Washington, D.C. This unusual endorsement fractured relationships among some of the strongest abortion foes in the state. Cyndi Mosteller, the leader of the Citizens for Life Chapter in Charleston, called the endorsement inconsistent with the group's policy of withholding endorsements when more than one anti-abortion candidate is in the race.¹⁹

Another state anti-abortion group, South Carolina Christians for Life held a press conference a day later to state that neither Bush nor McCain were qualified to be "pro-life," a position the organization had already voiced in a full-page ad in papers in late January.

¹⁹ Michelle Davis, "Abortion Foes Endorse Bush in the South Carolina Primary," *The State*, 10 February 2000, p. A8.

Despite this opposition, the national and state pro-life groups worked together to send mailings to about 80,000 households.²⁰ The mailings encouraged voters to compare the candidates and cited Bush's pro-life position against *Roe v. Wade* and the use of "tax dollars to fund experiments that use body parts from aborted babies" in contrast to McCain's conflicting statements and voting record on these issues. The mailing also noted that in New Hampshire, "pro-choice Republicans overwhelmingly preferred McCain above all the other candidates." The National Right to Life Committee also did one push poll phone call, encouraging people to vote for Bush, saying McCain would not reverse *Roe v. Wade* and Bush had maintained a strong pro-life position and was endorsed by Henry Hyde.

The Christian Coalition was also involved in the anti-McCain effort, reportedly targeting 140,000 voters in the state. The Christian Coalition of South Carolina sent out a card two days before the primary, entitled "10 disturbing facts about John McCain." These "facts" targeted McCain's stands on abortion, taxes, and other issues important to the Christian Right. For example, Fact 5 states that "John McCain voted repeatedly in favor of federal funding of experiments using tissue from aborted babies" and Fact 6 says that "John McCain's economic plan would result in the taxation of certain contributions to churches and charities." In addition, the Christian Coalition of America sent out a GOTV card encouraging people to vote. Members were also active in putting up signs, working phone banks, and going door-to-door. And on a Sunday talk show during the South Carolina campaign, Pat Robertson made a veiled allusion to "some of those other things that are in John McCain's background."²¹ An aspect of the Christian Coalition's campaign that received substantial attention in the national media was the phone calls with a recorded message from Reverend Pat Robertson. The Coalition has long used phone calls to activate voters as part of their issue advocacy, but rarely, if ever, has the Reverend Robertson himself delivered the message. His personal involvement demonstrates the intensity of anti-McCain sentiment in the group.

Other groups besides the religious right and pro-life organizations were involved in the campaign. A PAC called "Keep It Flying" became involved in the campaign at the last minute. This group, which advocates keeping the Confederate Flag flying above the South Carolina capitol, sent out an estimated 80,000 to 250,000 letters dated February 11, 2000. The letter quoted John McCain as saying, "The Confederate Flag is offensive in many, many ways. As we all know, it's a symbol of racism and slavery." But the letter omitted the rest of McCain's statement that said he could "understand how others might not feel that way" and mentioned his own relatives who fought for the Confederacy.²² The letter also noted that of the major candidates, only George Bush has refused to call the Confederate flag a racist symbol and quoted Laura Bush as saying, "It is not a symbol of racism." In addition to supporting Bush, the letter also attacked "liberal Democrats" in the state legislature, Governor Jim Hodges, the NAACP, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore. It also included a "Keep the Flag! Dump Hodges!" bumper sticker and asked for contributions to pay for TV and radio ads. The head of the group, Richard Hines, is a friend of Bush strategist Warren Tompkins. The McCain campaign staff suggests the Bush campaign and the PAC might have coordinated because the head of the group, Richard Hines, is a friend of Bush strategist Warren Tompkins. Tompkins was quick to deny any prior knowledge of the PAC's activities.

The National Smokers Alliance also attacked McCain, in part because of his sponsorship of an unsuccessful bill in 1998 that would have increased tobacco taxes by more than \$500 billion.²³ The

²⁰ Holly Gatling, executive director of South Carolina Citizens for Life, telephone interview by Danielle Vinson, 4 May 2000.

²¹ Dick Polman, "S.C. Primary a Tough Wake-Up Call For Bush," *Post and Courier*, 20 February 2000, 15A.

²² Dan Hoover, "McCain Backtracks on Confederate Flag," *Greenville News*, 11 January 2000, 1B.

²³ *Ibid.*

Alliance spent \$25,000 on radio and television advertising to remind smokers and tobacco growers in South Carolina, a state where tobacco is the number one cash crop, of McCain's record.

Anti-immigration groups constituted the major noncandidate specific issue advocacy groups active in South Carolina. The groups include Numbers USA.Com, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Negative Population Growth, Population Environment Balance, and American Immigration Control Foundation. These groups did not endorse a candidate, but told people to ask their candidates about mass immigration. The groups ran newspaper ads of approximately one-half of a page in eleven major dailies in South Carolina. Numbers USA, FAIR, and Negative Population Growth also ran radio and television ads and advertised on billboards across the state. In the major media markets, Numbers USA spent \$34,500, FAIR \$31,432, and Negative Population Growth \$49,192 on electronic advertising.

Similarly, the English Language PAC spent \$7,075 on newspaper ads in two cities. The ads claimed that McCain opposes English as the official language. They ended by saying, "When John McCain asks for your vote, answer him, answer him in a language he understands: 'No!'"

One other general issue group, Capital Watch, ran radio ads in Charleston and Columbia asking candidates to sign a pledge not to spend social security. Their expenses totaled \$1,150.

The only identified group supporting John McCain was Health Physicians for McCain. However, this turned out to be a front name for the owner of a pawn shop in Columbia who was upset about the attacks on McCain.²⁴ He bought \$2,500 worth of commercials on one television station in Columbia. Another individual, the president of Carolina Solar Lighting, ran a full-page ad for his company that included a letter of support for McCain and two pictures of McCain (one current and the other the 30-year-old military picture) in two major newspapers in the state for two days. Though he claimed to have received a special rate for the ads,²⁵ an estimate based on the cost of a full-page retail ad suggests that he spent close to \$24,000.

Other campaign activity attacking John McCain was undertaken individually. For example, Thomas Burch, chairman of the National Vietnam and Gulf War Veterans Coalition, joined Bush for a rally in Sumter, South Carolina, and endorsed him. In the endorsement Burch maligned McCain's record on veterans' affairs. The next day, five U.S. senators criticized Bush for the appearance and supported McCain's record. Other attacks came from a professor, church, radio station, magazine and talk shows participants. A Bob Jones University professor sent an e-mail claiming that McCain had fathered two children out of wedlock and had a reputation for partying, drinking, and womanizing. A Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, faxed a flyer criticizing McCain's "Fag Army" to South Carolina radio stations, all media outlets in Phoenix, Arizona, and all media outlets in Washington, D.C.²⁶ *World Magazine*, sent out by God's World Publishing Company in Asheville, North Carolina, also attacked McCain. On election night itself, some people went so far as to call radio talk shows and claim that a team of psychiatrists had determined that the Vietnamese had brainwashed McCain and programmed him to destroy the Republican party!

EFFECTIVENESS OF OUTSIDE SPENDING

Both campaigns agreed that the pro-life groups and the Christian Coalition were most effective, because they clearly presented to their supporters that McCain was not a pro-life, religious

²⁴ Walker, telephone interview .

²⁵ Dan Russell, president of Carolina Solar Lighting, telephone interview by Jenny Willis, 7 March 2000.

²⁶ Westboro Baptist Church Representative, telephone interview by Anna Nibley, 14 June 2000.

conservative, and was even a threat to these things. The decision by National Right to Life and South Carolina Citizens for Life to endorse Bush prevented the religious conservatives from splitting their votes between Bush and Keyes, who was an attractive alternative for some people. In an interesting twist, Keyes gave these groups more credibility when he publicly declared in his speeches and debates that he could not support McCain if McCain won the nomination because of his views on abortion, thus corroborating what the pro-life groups were saying.

Exit polls also reveal the effectiveness of these groups. Of the voters in the primary, 34 percent considered themselves to be part of the religious right, and among them Bush won among them 67 percent to McCain's 10 percent.²⁷ On abortion, 41 percent of the voters felt it should be illegal in most cases; 17 percent said it should always be illegal. Fifty-eight and 66 percent of those, respectively, voted for Bush.

The impact of other groups is less certain. Much has been made about the late entry of the Keep It Flying PAC into the race. However, Warren Tompkins, a Bush strategist, questions the importance of the PAC's involvement "in the grand scheme of things" for several reasons. First, the mailing by the group, while timed with the presidential primary, actually attacked numerous officials and groups in the state. In fact, McCain was not mentioned until the bottom of the first page, and only eleven lines of the two-page letter dealt with McCain or Bush. Second, though the letter did include only part of McCain's statement, there had been much news coverage of the subject in most of the major papers across the state, and those articles had included McCain's positions and his attempts to clarify the confusion on the issue. As Tompkins points out, people to whom this was an important issue had plenty of opportunities to read about McCain's positions in the newspaper or hear about them on television or radio, and they had probably already formed their opinions about the candidates. Also supporting this theory is the existence high-profile pro-flag state legislators active in McCain's campaign.

The Keep It Flying letter did generate some response, though it is not clear from whom. On election day, some people reported receiving a phone call warning that Bush was in favor of keeping the flag on the capitol; the caller encouraged voters to support McCain.

The issue advocacy groups, primarily the anti-immigration organizations, were visible during the campaign through their media commercials, newspaper ads, and billboards. These groups, however, had little impact on public opinion in South Carolina, a state that has an exceptionally small immigrant population.

Likewise, it is not clear that Thomas Burch's endorsement of Bush or comments against McCain had much affect on the veterans' vote. As Clemson University political science professor Dave Woodard noted, veterans have not been a very cohesive voting bloc in South Carolina,²⁸ and their vote in the primary was split evenly between McCain and Bush, with each receiving 47 percent of the veteran's vote.²⁹

The National Smokers Alliance ad campaign, while it did not set the agenda or make tobacco taxes a major issue in the campaign, did complement the Bush campaign. The ads came when McCain and Bush were debating tax cuts, and the National Smokers Alliance ads reinforced Bush's message that he, not McCain, would be the candidate to reform taxes.

²⁷ Rachel Graves, "McCain Staff Dissects Failed Primary Bid," *Post and Courier*, 20 February 2000, 14A.

²⁸ Allen G. Breed, "GOP Hopefuls in a Battle for Veterans' Votes," *Greenville News*, 7 February 2000, 1A.

²⁹ Associated Press, "Exit Poll," Voter News Service, 19 February 2000.

CONCLUSION

George Bush won South Carolina by 13 percent and saved his presidential campaign from oblivion. To secure the state, Bush built a wall between McCain and the social conservatives. He vowed to keep the strict pro-life plank in the GOP platform; he refused to meet with the Log Cabin Republicans. He was assisted in his successful campaign by several groups who attacked John McCain in different media in a variety of ways. Dick Polman of Knight Ridder said that Bush won in South Carolina “with extensive help from Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson and other Christian activists who painted McCain as a hypocrite with an immoral past.”³⁰ *Newsweek* noted how local surrogates in South Carolina accused McCain of various apostasies on abortion, gambling, and taxes and cited the role of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, the National Smokers Alliance, Keep It Flying, and pro-life forces.³¹ These groups, coupled with Bush’s financial resources, resulted in a Bush victory.

In particular, the anti-McCain attacks by outside groups allowed Bush to present an image of himself taking the high road in the campaign. And, in fact, voters in South Carolina said that it was McCain—not Bush—who had run the nastier campaign.³² While the anti-McCain groups could not legally run a coordinated campaign, their attacks complemented Bush’s successful campaign strategy and helped propel him to the Republican party’s nomination.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Back From the Brink,” *Newsweek*, February 28, 2000, 24.

³² Ibid.

TABLE I: GROUPS ACTIVE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Group	TV	Mail	Telephone	Radio	Newspaper Ad	GOTV
National Right to Life		X	X	X		X
S.C. Citizens for Life				X	X	
Christian Coalition		X	X			X
National Smokers Alliance	X			X		
Keep It Flying		X				
English Language PAC					X	
Numbers USA.Com	X			X	X	
FAIR	X				X	
Immigration Control Foundation						
Negative Population Growth	X			X		
Population Environment Balance					X	
Capital Watch				X		