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GOP showdown in S.C. Voter blocs lose their distinction

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By Sasha Issenberg, Globe Staff | January 19, 2008

FLORENCE, S.C. - The first three competitive Republican primaries have anointed flag-bearers for each wing of the party's modern coalition: Mike Huckabee leading its religious conservatives, John McCain its military conservatives, and Mitt Romney its economic conservatives.

In South Carolina, the differences among those groups have become so blurred that today's GOP primary is no longer a fractious battle of distinct voter blocs as much as a contest between a designee of the party establishment and the leader of an outsider insurgency.

McCain has cast himself as the institutional favorite, while Huckabee stands as the rebel.

"John McCain shows up with Joe Lieberman and Tom Coburn. Mike Huckabee shows up with Chuck Norris and Ric Flair," said J. David Woodard, a Clemson University political scientist, referring to two United States senators traveling with McCain and two heroes of 1980s macho mass culture backing Huckabee. "That's quite a contrast. Now which one do you think is the establishment?"

In previous primaries in South Carolina, voters have ratified the choice of Republican elites against renegade challenges, choosing Vice President George H.W. Bush over preacher Pat Robertson in 1988, Senator Bob Dole over populist Pat Buchanan in 1996, and Governor George W. Bush of Texas over McCain in 2000.

"If you're looking for a place where there's been follow-the-leader politics, there's nowhere stronger than South Carolina," said Brian P. Murphy, a fellow in American history at the University of Pennsylvania.

The traditional campaign math in South Carolina has counted on three dominant blocs among Republican voters. The state's Republican electorate has disproportionately large concentrations of religious and military conservatives. At least half of the voters turning out today are expected to be self-described evangelical Protestants, and about one-third are veterans, active-duty personnel, or their family.

"There's also a lot of traditional upper-income suburban Republicans, what we used to affectionately call 'country club Republicans,' " said Charlie Black, a longtime South Carolina strategist working for McCain. Those voters would be a natural constituency for Romney, a former businessman who has emphasized his corporate background. But he abruptly left the state Thursday, ceding the spotlight in the state to McCain and Huckabee.

The campaigns are no longer able to court South Carolina Republicans based on the old demographic distinctions. Evangelical churches are gaining prominence in upper-income suburbs and near military bases, and the state is rapidly urbanizing in ways that muddle regional identities.

Now most voters are religious conservatives: Three-quarters of likely Republican primary voters attend church "about once a week," according to a Palmetto Poll conducted last summer by Clemson. (Regular church-goers amount to the same share of the Democratic-primary electorate, which will vote one week later.)

"Somebody might belong to a country club, be a veteran, and go to a charismatic church," said Black.

As a result, many of the old tribal differences that divided the party have been replaced with a broad ideological consensus among Republicans built on strong prowar, antiabortion, antitax, and anti-immigration stances.

"Because the candidates have taken positions that most everyone are comfortable with, the question for evangelicals has become other questions, like who can the beat the Democratic nominee," said Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family

Council, an activist group representing religious conservatives. "The social-issue thing is pretty much settled."

Candidates are delicately navigating the changing terrain. On Wednesday, after arriving in the state from Michigan, McCain began his remarks at several stops by emphasizing his opposition to abortion and child pornography and his support for conservative judicial appointments - issues that he rarely brings up elsewhere unless asked.

"This is a very prolife part of the state, and they want to know," McCain said in an interview afterward.

Yet the following day, McCain shifted his focus to a supply-side worldview reflecting the economic mentality of party elites who have overwhelmingly chosen him over Huckabee.

He campaigned alongside former Cabinet secretary Jack Kemp, a hero to Wall Street fiscal conservatives, and unveiled an economic plan that featured corporate tax cuts, sped-up depreciation schedules, and an elimination of the alternative minimum tax. These are issues of concern to upper-middle-class taxpayers and small-business owners.

Huckabee, in a speech on the same day at Clemson University, where he appeared with Norris and Flair, also drifted from the core social issues that he has used to appeal to evangelicals.

"He did not even mention abortion," said Woodard. "He did not give an abortion-family-freedom kind of talk."

Huckabee has run ads promising to remind Americans "of the guy they work with, not the guy who laid them off," and amplified his focus on economic discontent, suggesting that working-class interests were betrayed by corporate priorities in Washington.

"I can't think I've ever heard a Republican candidate here talk about that," said Smith. "That's an effort to get past an evangelical appeal and get to a class appeal."

Huckabee's antielitism jibes with his assault on the state's political hierarchy. McCain has been traveling with a cavalcade of dignitaries both local and national, many of whom sided with Bush in 2000.

"I want you to judge me by my friends," McCain said yesterday in Florence.

The evangelicals, particularly Pentecostals, who challenged that party establishment during Robertson's 1988 campaign have since become neutralized as a distinct force in South Carolina politics largely because today's party reflects their values.

"There was an us-versus-them mentality, but as the party became more conservative, some of that went away," said Smith.

The old tribal concerns reemerged briefly yesterday in a way that reminded McCain that there is no longer room to run solely as the champion of national security conservatives.

In Florence, a once-rural community booming with new businesses, McCain faced a long sequence of questions about veterans' healthcare, standard fare from military families.

Then, when presented a routine question about illegal immigration - which polls indicate is a top issue among South Carolina Republicans of all stripes - McCain still appeared to have those outdated sectarian interests in mind.

"I never supported amnesty, nor have I ever supported Social Security benefits for veterans," he said, before catching himself and correcting it to "illegal immigrants."

"To heck with you veterans!" McCain joked. ■