



Electability decided South Carolina Republican primary, some say

Evangelicals looking at issues beyond religion, S.C. Baptist leader says

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COLUMBIA, S.C. – This state – and George W. Bush – dealt a mortal blow to John McCain in the 2000 presidential race, but he got a big dose of vindication Saturday.

"Thank you, South Carolina, for bringing us across the finish line first. ... It took us awhile, but what's eight years among friends," Mr. McCain declared at his victory rally.

Three GOP candidates came into the Palmetto state with wins – a "scrambled egg" of a contest, said GOP strategist Tucker Eskew, who helped in the Bush South Carolina victory in 2000.

With Mike Huckabee's victory in Iowa, Mr. McCain's here and in New Hampshire, and Mitt Romney's in Michigan and Nevada, Republicans remain in search of an unequivocal front-runner.

Mr. Huckabee, former head of the Arkansas Baptist Convention, was counting on South Carolina's huge evangelical population to prove that that Iowa was no fluke. But they never coalesced behind him.

"They appreciate his values. They know he's a man of God," but they're also interested in other issues – taxes, immigration, national security, said Dr. Eddie Leopard, president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and pastor at Millbrook Baptist Church in Aiken, S.C.

Mr. Romney spent a full day barnstorming in South Carolina after winning Michigan, but abandoned the state midday Thursday, saying that Mr. McCain seemed to have it locked up.

Today, Mr. Huckabee is scheduled to headline a fundraiser at the ranch of action star Chuck Norris in Navasota, in southeast Texas. "We've got a lot of miles ahead of us. It's a long process and a long path."

Mr. McCain needed South Carolina to break from the pack.

He seemed to benefit from having Fred Thompson, the former Tennessee senator and actor, compete directly with Mr. Huckabee for social conservatives. Mr. Thompson finished third.

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Mr. McCain had braced for a repeat of the ugliness of the 2000 showdown with Mr. [with a Texas twist](#) Bush, but it never quite materialized. This year, he took preemptive action, setting up rapid response phone banks and "truth squads" of local allies to tamp down any charges.

The contrast between then and now illustrates Mr. McCain's evolution from insurgent to establishment candidate, at least in South Carolina.

Much of the old Bush team and the bulk of the state party's leaders lined up with him early last year.

Dr. Oran Smith, president of Palmetto Family Council, the state affiliate of James Dobson's Focus on the Family, said that because nearly all the GOP candidates offered conservatives a comfort level on social issues, electability became paramount.

"Who can take it to the Democrats?" he said. "I don't think there's any question that McCain has a lot of momentum right now and he could go the distance."