

ROLL CALL

New Hampshire GOP Vote a Rebuke to Negative Advertising

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Members of the media and political pros have spent much of the past week debating the unexpected outcome of the New Hampshire Democratic primary and what the McCain win in the Republican primary really means. Instead of clarifying an already chaotic field on both sides, New Hampshire voters only added to the confusion of the 2008 presidential contest.



Much of the speculation as to what happened has focused on the polling in the Democratic primary that almost universally missed the mark by a wide margin. But an analysis of the exit polls and election data shows the New Hampshire primary produced more assaults on conventional wisdom than just the come-from-behind victory of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) over Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.).

Here are some observations about the Republican race, post New Hampshire, that got short shrift, as the media and much of the polling community collectively scratched their heads over their misreading of Obama's strength.

The old canard that you can't win a presidential contest without lots of money really took it on the chin in both New Hampshire and Iowa. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (R), the most cash-starved of the top-tier candidates, managed to win these crucial contests, demonstrating that maybe, just maybe, candidates really are more important than consultants.

On the other hand, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R) was spending millions on advertising and organization in Iowa and New Hampshire. But he didn't win either state, which ought to make consultants in both parties rethink the role of advertising, especially negative advertising.

Voters are looking at an expanding universe of sources for political information and demand that candidates do more than attack the other guy.

They want ideas and solutions from candidates, not negative ads, and Iowa and New Hampshire rewarded those who gave them what they wanted.

Huckabee's victory in Iowa and his rise in the national polls showed that a positive populist economic message, focused on the problems of the middle class, has traction with Republican voters. McCain's straight talk on the war and his view of tax and spending cuts resonated with voters as well.

Interestingly, although most of the media, especially in the early debates, harped on illegal immigration, abortion, religion and the candidates' personal baggage, the New Hampshire exit polls found that in the Republican primary, the economy was the most important issue at 31

percent, followed by the war in Iraq at 24 percent, illegal immigration at 23 percent and terrorism at 18 percent.

According to the New Hampshire exit polls, McCain won economic voters over Romney, 41 percent to 21 percent; the war in Iraq voters, 45 percent to 27 percent; and the terrorism voters, 39 percent to 23 percent.

Although Romney did win the illegal immigration voters by a huge margin, 56 percent to 19 percent, it wasn't enough.

Over the past week, I've heard more than one political "expert" credit McCain's New Hampshire victory to the independent vote.

It's not surprising.

Before the New Hampshire primary, most political observers believed that to win, McCain would need a significant independent vote because of his "unpopularity" with base Republicans. This "fact" led them also to argue that McCain would have a difficult time winning some later key primaries, which are closed to all but Republican voters.

But "facts" are tricky things. True, McCain won independents, beating Romney 38 percent to 30 percent. But he also won Republicans, 37 percent to 33 percent over Romney. One last observation about the independent vote: In 2000, independents made up 32 percent of the Republican primary vote. Last Tuesday, they accounted for 34 percent of the vote. So much for the Democratic stampede.

Assumptions about the role of religious voters were turned upside down in New Hampshire as well. Although much of the media believed evangelical voters would march in lock step behind former preacher Huckabee, these voters turned out to have a bit of an independent streak. In Iowa, Huckabee won less than half (45 percent) of the evangelical vote, with Romney next closest at 19 percent.

In New Hampshire, McCain, Huckabee and Romney found themselves in a virtual three-way tie for the evangelical vote with McCain and Huckabee at 28 percent and Romney at 27 percent.

If these exit polls are right, the media's constant focus on Romney's Mormon faith at the expense of his position on key issues did a disservice to the electoral process.

Finally, the Republican candidates' "favorables" were another overlooked set of numbers in the exit polls. In the Republican primary, voters gave McCain a 75 percent favorable rating.

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Romney had solid favorables as well at 63 percent and 62 percent, with Huckabee trailing at 54 percent. These are the kind of numbers Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) only dream of.

When it comes to the Democratic side, there has been plenty of speculation over how the media and the polling community blew it, and there are probably plenty of reasons why. Voters screens, late deciders, a larger-than-expected turnout, these are just a few of the possibilities.

There has been a lot of talk about a "surge" of female voters to explain the discrepancy in the polls. Clearly, more women in total numbers voted in the Democratic primary this year. But in 2000, women made up 62 percent of the Democratic vote.

This year, it was down 5 points to 57 percent, 3 points higher than 2004, but a little surprising with Clinton on the ballot.

Clinton's teary moment probably had some impact. But if there is anything to learn from that episode, it is how quickly the new media can affect the political environment.

Cable television played the clip along with her husband's "fairy tale" attack on Obama practically nonstop in the 24 hours before the polls opened. Pundits talked of nothing else.

Today, Michigan will create the buzz. Let's hope it's based on more than assumptions.

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