

# Texas Roundup

*Bringing McCain voters to the Bush corral*

By James Barnes



Texas Governor George W. Bush captured the Republican presidential nomination the old-fashioned way, on the strength of rank-and-file GOP voters. But energizing the party's base won't be enough for Bush to prevail in the November general election. A look at the exit poll data from the Republican primaries reveals the opportunities and challenges the governor faces in reaching out to supporters of his chief rival for the GOP nomination, Arizona Senator John McCain—and reach out he must.

When Bob Dole captured the Republican nomination in 1996, he did so by uniting the center of the party behind his candidacy. By contrast, Bush won the GOP nod this year by mobilizing its conservative wing. Indeed, in most states, Bush was more successful in corralling the votes of very conservative voters than Patrick Buchanan had been four years ago.

What both the 1996 and 2000 Republican contests underscore is the importance of those GOP primary voters who describe themselves as somewhat conservative. According to exit polls conducted by Voter News Service, that group represented between 29 and 40% of Republican voters in primaries held between February 1 and March 7. On

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average, "somewhat conservatives" accounted for 35% of the GOP voters in those 17 primaries. (This figure would have been larger if post-March 7 states were included, but McCain suspended his campaign on March 9, and results from subsequent primaries didn't have an impact on the GOP race.) Moderates made up 35% of the Republican electorate, while those who described themselves as very conservative accounted for an average of 18% of the voters. Most of the rest of the primary voters described themselves as somewhat liberal and a handful as very liberal.

In five of the seven primaries McCain won—Arizona, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont—he carried the somewhat conservative vote. In his other two victories, Connecticut and Michigan, he won 40 and 39%, respectively, of these voters. In New York, he won 43% of them, but he didn't carry the Empire State because Bush captured the same share of moderates. Even there, though, the Texan won on the strength of his 72 to 16% margin of victory among very conservative voters, 14% of the primary vote.

Indeed, Bush was able to defeat McCain because he fashioned a strong conservative coalition. In the pivotal South Carolina primary, he prevailed because of his strength on the right. McCain easily won the 10% of self-described liberals who voted, and he carried moderates, 59 to 37%, while Bush carried somewhat conservative voters by the same margin. But 24% of the primary voters described themselves as very conservative, and Bush swept that group, 74 to 16%.

By comparison, when Dole turned the corner on the GOP nomination in South Carolina four years ago, he won



by carrying moderates and somewhat conservative voters. Buchanan carried very conservative voters—25% of that year's primary voter—but only by about 47 to 34% over Dole.

Time and again, during the competitive stage of the contest, this pattern repeated itself. Bush won huge margins among very conservative voters in almost every state.

Unfortunately for Bush, who entered the presidential race positioned as a moderate, he did not fare nearly as well among this group of Republicans. He carried moderates in only two of the 17 primaries in the February 1 to March 7 period for which there is exit poll data—Delaware and Georgia, both states where McCain didn't campaign.

Republican moderates would normally be considered potential swing voters in a general election. Bush's relatively weak performance among this group in the primaries means that he can hardly take them for granted.

W inning over the McCain vote is probably the key task for Bush before the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia this summer. But who were McCain's supporters, and how did they differ from Bush's? By aggregating the exit poll data from the 11 states that held GOP primaries on March 7—California, Connecticut,

Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Vermont—we get pretty comprehensive profiles of both.

While McCain drew some self-described Democrats to vote for him in the Republican primaries, the vast majority were Republicans or independents, the same as Bush's March 7 primary voters.

One piece of good news for Bush is that the differences between his support and McCain's didn't appear to be based on class distinctions. There were no significant variations between Bush and McCain supporters, except that the McCain independents tended to be a little bit wealthier than the Bush independents. Half the Bush independents were middle class voters with family incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000. For the McCain independents, that share was just under 50%.

As has already been discussed, there were some significant ideological distinctions between the Bush and McCain supporters. Among the self-described Republicans who voted for Bush on March 7, almost two-thirds described themselves as conservative, while only about one-fourth said they were moderates. McCain's Republican supporters divided evenly along moderate-conservative lines. Interestingly, these philosophical distinctions were less pronounced among independents who supported the two candidates. About half of the McCain independents described themselves as moderate, while two out of every five of the Bush independents said they were.

On specific issues, there were also differences. One major split was on abortion. About two-thirds of the independents who voted for McCain said abortion should be mostly or always legal. Among the Arizonan's Republican supporters, about 57% shared that view.

The Republicans who backed Bush had exactly the opposite view: 57% said abortion should be mostly or always illegal. Nearly half the governor's independent supporters said abortion should be mostly or always illegal.

On Social Security, McCain voters were more likely to think that strengthening the program should be a priority of the next president, as opposed to cutting taxes. McCain Republicans shared this view by a 2-to-1 margin, and among the McCain independents, it was almost 3-to-1. Solid majorities of the Bush Republicans and Bush independents wanted tax cuts to be the priority of the next president.

But these differences on issues did not tell the whole story behind candidate choice. Nearly two-thirds of all McCain voters said that leadership and personal qualities were more important to their votes than issues. Among this group, given the choice of voting for Bush or Vice President Al Gore in the general election, Bush fared relatively well in the exit polls. By about 53 to 35%, McCain voters said they would stick with Bush in the fall. But among the one-third of McCain voters who said issues are more important, Bush's lead was much narrower, 47 to 41%.

That's not to say that McCain voters, admittedly in the heat of the primary campaign, had a very positive view of the Texan. About half the McCain Republicans said Bush did not have the knowledge to serve effectively as President, and some two-thirds of the McCain independents shared that view.

Likewise, by a 3-to-1 margin, the McCain independents had an unfavorable versus favorable opinion of the Bush. Among the McCain Republicans, opinion of Bush was more evenly divided but still negative, by a margin of about 5 to 4.

And, contrary to popular perception, the McCain voters were hardly newcomers to Republican politics, at least not much more so than Bush's supporters were. About seven of every 10 of the McCain independents said they had voted in a GOP primary before. For Bush independents, that figure was about 8 in 10. Among Republicans who voted for Bush and McCain, almost an identical proportion, a little more than 8 in 10, said they had voted in a previous GOP primary.

This indicates that voting Republican is not a completely alien concept for the vast majority of McCain supporters. If Bush could secure an enthusiastic endorsement from McCain, it would undoubtedly help him win them over.

Republican operatives like to say that nothing will unite the party's sympathizers like the prospect of a Gore presidency after eight years of Bill Clinton. But to make huge strides with the McCain voters, particularly the self-described independents who supported him and some of the Republicans, Bush is probably going to have to make some concession on issues, such as moderating his tax proposal, or stressing other issues like education. And Bush will at least have to try to de-emphasize his and his party's restrictive stand on abortion rights.

If he does neither, Bush faces a serious problem in the fall. Given the choice between Bush and Gore in the general election, almost half of the McCain independents say they would vote for the Vice President, and one-quarter of the McCain Republicans would follow suit.

With the current national polls showing Bush and Gore running even, a defection of the McCain voters this widespread would be a big hurdle for Bush to overcome. 