

Romney, Santorum in Virtual Tie in Iowa Republican Caucus

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Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum ended up in a virtual tie for first place in the Republican caucus in Iowa, the first official contest of the 2012 presidential election.

Santorum and Romney each received about 25 percent of the votes cast by caucus participants, followed by Congressman Ron Paul, with 21 percent. The three trailing candidates were former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, at 13 percent, Texas Governor Rick Perry, at 10 percent, and Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, at 5 percent.

Despite the vast media attention to the Iowa caucus and the exaggerated significance attributed to it, voter turnout was barely 120,000, about 4 percent of the population of the state, up only a tiny fraction from the 118,000 who participated in 2008.

Nearly 60 percent of those attending the caucuses identified themselves as Christian fundamentalists, and these provided the bulk of the support for Santorum, an ultra-right Catholic who based his campaign largely on opposition to abortion and gay marriage. In his address to a rally late Tuesday night, after the polls had closed, Santorum attributed his near-tie for first place to “the daily grace of God.” He went on to denounce any proposal to raise taxes on the wealthy or spend money on social welfare programs.

The number of Republicans participating actually declined from four years ago, as Ron Paul, a right-wing libertarian, attracted a section of young people, previously registered as independents, on the basis of an appeal to antiwar sentiment. Romney received fewer votes this year than in 2008, when he finished second in Iowa to former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee.

Even in the corporate-controlled press there were occasional acknowledgements of the artificial and stage-managed character of the process. The New York Times wrote that “veterans of Iowa politics say the size and tenor of this year’s Republican crowds across the state have not come close to those in the final days of campaigning by the 2008 candidates.”

The Washington DC publication, the Hill, described one Romney event where, “Not for the first time, representatives of the media outnumbered the members of the public in attendance. TV cameramen, photographers and reporters filled three sides of a large room in a historic building in downtown Des Moines. A relatively modest number of Romney supporters—perhaps 100—were seated in the center of the room.”

As is always the case in American capitalist politics, money played a decisive role in the outcome in Iowa. An unprecedented \$12.5 million was spent on the Iowa caucus, a staggering \$100 for every vote cast. If the same ratio were to apply to the November election, the spending by the two capitalist parties and their corporate backers would approach \$15 billion.

So-called “Super PACs,” political action committees financed by corporations and wealthy individuals, spent more money in campaign advertising in Iowa than the candidates themselves. Super PACs came into being after the US Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision, which overturned all legal restrictions on the use of corporate and private wealth to buy elections. Wealthy backers of Romney and Perry established the biggest such committees, which paid for a huge negative advertising campaign directed mainly at Gingrich, who lacked the funds to reply in kind.

Gingrich had been leading in the polls in Iowa in November after the collapse of previous Republican frontrunners in that state, including Bachman, Perry and Herman Cain, who withdrew from the campaign after a series of sex scandals. A barrage of advertising recalling Gingrich’s censure by the House in a corruption scandal and his \$1.6 million “consulting” contract with the financial giant Freddie Mac drove him down into fourth place.

In a bitter appearance after the polls closed in Iowa, Gingrich denounced Romney’s campaign tactics and vowed to continue his own campaign into primaries January 10 in New Hampshire and January 21 in South Carolina. He praised Santorum, clearly suggesting an alliance to prevent a Romney nomination.

According to a report by the New York Times, media billionaire Rupert Murdoch, the owner of Fox News, saluted Santorum Monday night on Twitter as the “only candidate with genuine big vision for country.”

Romney, himself a right-wing, pro-business candidate, appears at this stage to be the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination, primarily because of money. The former CEO of Bain Capital disposes of personal financial resources that dwarf those of his competitors, and he can continue to tap his hedge fund and Wall Street backers for funds.

The media- and money-driven Iowa caucus highlights the undemocratic character of the US electoral process, in which the vast majority of the population—the working class—is effectively disenfranchised. The spectacle underscores the vast and unbridgeable chasm separating the entire political system from the concerns and needs of the people.

The Republican candidates seek to outdo one another in calling for the dismantling of what remains of social programs and the reduction of taxes on corporations and the rich. Obama carries out essentially the same policy, while cynically presenting himself and the Democrats as advocates for “middle class” working people.

Neither party, both of which are in the pay of Wall Street, offers any policies to address mass unemployment and the growth of social inequality, poverty, homelessness and hunger in America.

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