

After 'Super Tuesday' McCain is clear leader, Democrats in a dogfight: Iraq likely to determine General Elections

by Marcin Zaborowski

The Primary Elections in 24 states across the US on 5 February 2008 – otherwise known as 'Super Tuesday' – have produced a clear winner on the Republican side, John McCain. However, the same is not true for the Democrats, with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama remaining tied in their race for the nomination.

John McCain, whose campaign appeared to be on the verge of collapse only three months ago, has secured 613 delegates, nearly half of the 1,191 needed for the nomination, and is now far ahead of his rivals. Senator Obama won in 13 states against Clinton's 8, but it was the New York senator who won more delegates thanks to her advantage in large states: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and California. Whilst votes are still being counted, Clinton now has 845 to Obama's 765 delegates, out of 2,025 that are needed for the nomination. Most estimates suggest that once the count is completed Obama and Clinton are likely to finish dead-even.

McCain's rivals Romney (260 delegates) and Huckabee (190 delegates) have pledged to stay in the race. However, McCain's advantage over them and the sense of momentum built by his campaign are such that it is very unlikely that they could challenge McCain's claim to the nomination. Romney has invested over 50 million dollars of his own money in the campaign, for example in Florida alone he spent 10 times more on advertisements than McCain, yet he did not secure a single win in a large state. It is expected that he may now be looking for a graceful way out and to run again in the future. Huckabee scored some impressive victories in the South's Bible belt (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia and Tennessee) largely thanks to the vote of evangelical Christians; however, his support remains more or less limited to this community. At the same time McCain has to work on his outreach to the conservatives and to religious communities. This suggests that a McCain-Huckabee ticket may be considered by the Arizona senator as an option.

On the Democratic side, the demographic dynamics of the Tuesday race suggest that the momentum could be shifting in favour of Obama. As in the South Carolina race, Obama secured an overwhelming majority of the African American vote – close to 80 percent, which proved a major factor in his victory in southern Alabama and Georgia. As before, Clinton received strong support from the Hispanics, with 6 out of 10 voting for her - a major factor in securing victories in California and New York. However, in the two groups where she previously enjoyed an advantage – women and white males – Clinton and Obama divided votes roughly equally. Obama has also performed better with independents – a key asset with a view to general elections. However, with the string of forthcoming primaries – especially in Texas and Ohio on 4 March – the Democrats are still far from taking their final decision.

Iraq in the Campaign

Republicans and Democrats alike now consider the economy to be the most important issue. For Democrats the war in Iraq ranks second and healthcare third. Republican voters declared immigration to be their second concern and war in Iraq the third. However, the outcome of 'Super Tuesday' suggests that foreign policy is now more likely to become a central theme in the campaign.

Although Republicans do not rank the war in Iraq high in their electoral priorities, they voted for McCain whose strengths and conservative credentials are really in the realm of national security. McCain's vote against Bush's tax cuts in 2001 and 2003 is one of the reasons why the conservatives remain sceptical of him. This is even more the case with regard to McCain's position on immigration reform, where he joined forces with Democrats and moderates and supported the idea of an amnesty for illegal migrants. National security is probably the only top electoral issue where McCain appeals to the hard core of his party as well as independents and conservative Democrats. The latter include Joe Lieberman, Al Gore's running mate in 2000, who now campaigns for McCain because of his position on Iraq.

Iraq is also one of the main reasons why Obama, the only Democrat who opposed the war from the beginning, has challenged Hillary Clinton so successfully. Unlike Obama, Clinton voted in favour of the war in 2002 and she continued to support it for the first two years of the invasion. Her change of heart on the matter looks to many Democrats as disingenuous and motivated by the war's growing unpopularity since 2004/5. What solutions do these candidates offer for Iraq and other foreign policy issues?

John McCain has argued in favour of investing more troops in Iraq from the very beginning and the perceived success of the surge policy looks to many as a vindication of his position. No friend of Bush, whom he challenged during the 2000 race for the Republican nomination, McCain has been one of the harshest critics of Bush within his own party. However, in 2007 McCain became one of the staunchest supporters of the 'surge' and an opponent of the idea of developing a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. During the presidential campaign McCain stated that if necessary the US should stay in Iraq, even for one hundred years.

On the Democratic side, the two contenders for the nomination, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, have developed elaborate and in some aspects quite different ideas for the future of America's involvement in Iraq; however, both of them have essentially argued in favour of pulling out of Iraq. Hillary Clinton is more conservative on Iraq, and national security in general, than Obama. Unlike John Edwards, she never apologised for her vote in favour on the war in 2002. Her plan for pulling out is quite cautious and it contains some caveats. Clinton has promised that if elected she will ask the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defence and the NSC to draw up a plan of withdrawal from Iraq within 60 days of taking office, with the goal of having most troops out by the end of 2013. The pullout would not include the specialised units targeting Al Qaeda and the US would retain a military presence in northern Iraq in the Kurdish areas. Some units would also stay with the purpose of deterring Iranian aggression and possibly to support the Iraqi military.

The pullout would be followed up by intensive diplomatic initiatives in the region. Clinton would like to draw Iran and Syria into the process and convene a regional stabilisation initiative composed of all states bordering Iraq, key allies and global powers. Leaving Iraq would also allow the US to pursue a renewed effort in promoting a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Barack Obama opposed the invasion from the beginning. After joining the US Senate in 2004, he supported funding for the troops but he opposed the 2007 troop surge. Obama's ideas for the future of America's role in Iraq are consistent with the recommendations of the Baker/Hamilton Iraq Study Group Report. As recommended by the ISG, Obama called for the phased withdrawal of all combat brigades by 31 March 2008. With this target having been rejected by the Administration, Obama argues now in favour of a phased withdrawal – one or two brigades a month – to be completed within a 16-month timeframe. He would leave limited forces to combat terrorism but no troops would be earmarked to act as a deterrent to Iran. US forces would be involved in training the Iraqi army only if there was a political reconciliation. Obama also explicitly ruled out the possibility of establishing permanent US bases in Iraq.

It is clear that Democrats and Republicans have diametrically opposed ideas on the future of Iraq. McCain wants to commit more troops and suggests a long-term engagement, whereas Obama and Clinton want to pull out. Clinton's ideas are more centrist but should the Democrats nominate Obama there is little doubt that we will witness a battle of radically different foreign policy philosophies and potentially a dramatic shift in Iraq after the elections.

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