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S.C. a big test for McCain

Arizonan fighting history, Huckabee in social-conservative battleground

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AIKEN, S.C. - Just like in 2000, Republican Sen. John McCain finds his political fate in the hands of the socially conservative South Carolina voter.

It's a precarious spot for the Arizonan.

Unlike the more libertarian residents of New Hampshire, who have twice embraced McCain, the voters likely to dominate today's GOP primary in South Carolina have a religious bent and a historically antagonistic relationship with McCain.

Eight years ago, McCain's bid for the presidency derailed here when George W. Bush and an army of sympathetic activists and other operatives, some connected with the Religious Right, went into hyper-attack mode. Demoralized by the nasty battle, McCain gave an angry speech in which he denounced socially conservative leaders as "agents of intolerance" and ripped the "political tactics of division and slander."

This time, McCain and his supporters say the landscape has shifted.

The nation is at war. A debate over border security is raging. McCain has made inroads with evangelicals, and his campaign is trying to pounce on any scurrilous attacks.

Lingering suspicion exists, however, and there is a wild card: former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who is more outspoken about his Christian faith than even Bush. Huckabee is neck and neck with McCain in recent polls.

South Carolina, a major prize in the nomination race, again could dash McCain's White House hopes. Or, it could restore his momentum after Tuesday's second-place finish in Michigan. McCain won the New Hampshire primary and is looking for another big victory as he moves toward Florida's Jan. 29 contest.

Various factors could work for or against McCain in his appeal to the first Southern state to vote in the presidential race.

Fight against terror

Unlike eight years ago, America now is fighting a global terrorist network, and McCain backers are counting on his record on Iraq and Afghanistan to overshadow lingering differences. That appeals to the fierce patriotism of South Carolina Republicans.

"One thing I've learned is that evangelical Christians, economic conservatives and vegetarians all want to make sure we win the war against radical Islam," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a key McCain ally.

"Conservative Christians want to make sure they're led by a president of faith. They want to make sure that their taxes are low. But they really do appreciate the fact that radical Islam is a threat to people of faith."

Some social conservatives at McCain events said his foreign-policy experience is one of the main qualities that attracted them. As in other states, McCain campaign stops are usually packed with military veterans. South Carolina's large population of armed-forces retirees and its military tradition are advantages for McCain, a former Navy pilot and prisoner of war during the Vietnam War.

After a Thursday campaign rally, McCain said he was pleased with his standing with the state's social conservatives, adding, "We have strong supporters in that community." He emphasized post-9/11 national-security issues and other common interests.

"Climate change is a very big issue with them and, of course, their deep concern about radical Islamic extremism," McCain told *The Arizona Republic*. "They are more concerned about that than any other group of Americans."

Defining McCain

In politics, every candidate tries to define his or her image and redefine his competitors'. In 2000, McCain's enemies in South Carolina successfully redefined him.

It's a harder task today, said South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster, a McCain booster.

"Everybody knows him better now," McMaster said. "They know he's pro-life. They know he's pro-family. They know he wants to reduce taxes and is for fiscal conservatism. All of these things that he stands for are very important to what is called the values voter."

Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, a faith-based public-policy organization, said McCain took a big step toward reconciling with evangelicals by supporting a 2006 same-sex marriage ban, which South Carolina passed with 78 percent of the vote.

Other South Carolina observers view McCain more skeptically.

His support of comprehensive immigration reform, deplored by critics as amnesty, continues to dog his candidacy and set back his efforts to reach out to local conservatives, said Bo Moore, chairman of the history department at the Citadel military college in Charleston.

McCain, who teamed with Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., on last year's immigration bill, is trying to live down other past collaborations with Democrats, such as on campaign-finance reform.

Blocking the mud

The Bush-vs.-McCain slugfest is now widely viewed as a low point in recent American politics. Among the reported mudslinging were telephone calls attacking McCain's wife, Cindy, and racially charged whispers that McCain had a Black baby.

The McCains adopted their daughter, Bridget, from an orphanage run by the late Mother Teresa. Bridget was born in Bangladesh.

"There was a lot of really dirty campaigning going on that I'm sure Governor Bush knew nothing about, but nevertheless, it was going on," McMaster said. "This time it's different."

Or maybe not.

In recent days, South Carolina voters have gotten mailers and calls disparaging McCain on topics ranging from his Vietnam War record to his 1980 divorce.

McCain's campaign assembled a "truth squad," which includes McMaster, to beat back allegations and innuendo.

One area of weakness

The candidate who threatens most to beat McCain here is an ordained Baptist minister, a true Southern religious conservative. Huckabee relied on churchgoing voters to help him win the Iowa caucuses.

But the credentialed competitors don't stop there.

Fred Thompson, a former senator from Tennessee, has won the endorsement of the South Carolina Citizens for Life. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the Michigan champ, also is contending for conservative votes.

Smith said McCain's strength among religious conservatives is probably the weakest of the four GOP front-runners.

One thing working in his favor, Smith said, is a perception that McCain is the Republican most likely to defeat the Democratic nominee. It appeals to "some evangelicals who are very, very motivated by that goal," Smith said.

McCain also could benefit from a splintered religious vote.

"I currently have on my board people who are very active for John McCain, Fred Thompson, Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney," Smith said. "So, if we are any representative sample, there is definitely not a bloc vote going for any one candidate."

Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., campaigned for McCain in South Carolina earlier this month but declined to speculate which way social conservatives are trending.

"I got a sense that the Huckabee people were pretty silent but pretty strong." Kyl said.

Reach the reporter at dan.nowicki@arizonarepublic.com. Read his McCain blog at www.mccain.azcentral.com.

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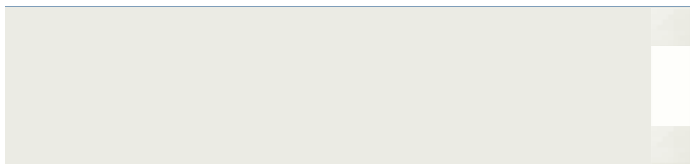
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