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## S.C. a battleground for GOP core constituency

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By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | January 11, 2008

MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. - South Carolina is called the gateway to the Republican nomination because since 1980 no candidate has become the nominee without winning here first.

This year, the first-in-the-South primary has shaped up as a crucial test of how well the candidates can appeal to some of the party's core constituencies - evangelicals, military families, and budget-cutters. More so than Iowa, where Christian conservatives dominate, and New Hampshire, where fiscal conservatives rule, South Carolina's primary on Jan. 19 could unite the fractured party behind one candidate - and force others to drop out.

"We're a pretty good little test tube for them," said Chip Felkel, a veteran South Carolina political consultant who is unaffiliated with any of the candidates. "To be a state this small, we have a mix of fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, and transplanted Northerners. We have a real interesting mix here for them to get a taste of what sells and what doesn't in terms of Republican politics."

Two new polls conducted Wednesday and released yesterday suggest that John McCain, a Vietnam War hero who is counting on support from veterans, is edging ahead of Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist preacher who is courting evangelical Christians. The primary electorate, however, is more heavily weighted to Huckabee's base. According to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 53 percent of likely primary voters are white evangelical Protestants, while only 29 percent are active or retired service members.

While McCain, who won in New Hampshire on Tuesday, and Huckabee, who won in Iowa last week, battle to be the front-runner, former senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee says South Carolina is where he will "make my stand," after virtually writing off Iowa and New Hampshire. But he was well behind in fourth in the two new South Carolina polls.

And in perhaps the most surprising twist, Mitt Romney, who has spent years building an organization in South Carolina, abruptly cut back his efforts this week, pulling his ads off the air and shifting resources to Michigan, which holds its primary on Tuesday. He stood third in the new South Carolina polls.

Advisers have said Romney, who finished second in both Iowa and New Hampshire, must focus on Michigan, where he was born and raised. But his decision to pull back in South Carolina has baffled and disappointed Republicans here.

"I guess he's going to make the firewall Michigan instead of South Carolina, and that could turn out to be a tragic mistake," said Katon Dawson, chairman of the South Carolina Republican Party. "You cannot win the presidency without shoring up your Southern base. And South Carolina is a very, very large part of that equation of shoring up the Southern base."

The state party and Fox News Channel sponsored a debate last night in Myrtle Beach featuring all the Republican contenders except for Representative Duncan Hunter of California.

Most candidates spent yesterday prepping for the debate, their third in six days, but McCain held events in Greenville and last evening in Myrtle Beach. "We're coming into the homestretch and I'm asking you for your vote," McCain told several hundred cheering supporters at Studebaker's restaurant last night. "This could be a very close election."

In 2000, McCain also rolled into South Carolina off a big win in New Hampshire, but he lost to George W. Bush after a whisper campaign, whose organizers were never identified, spread false rumors that he had an illegitimate black child. This year, his supporters have set up a "truth squad" to counter negative attacks. Voters yesterday received a McCain campaign mailing featuring a photo of his wife holding the daughter they adopted from "Mother Teresa's orphanage in Bangladesh."

McCain also has the support of US Senator Lindsey O. Graham. But both he and McCain have faced a backlash in South Carolina for their backing of a bill, which failed last year in Congress, to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. Conservative talk-radio hosts have relentlessly mocked the measure as "Graham-nesty."

Huckabee has found what many see as a natural base of support among the state's evangelical voters and has also appealed to working-class voters. But he has a relatively small campaign organization, and will be relying on more informal networks to power his campaign.

"One of the key things Huckabee is depending on is word-of-mouth support among Baptist clergy and other evangelical pastors," said James L. Guth, a Furman University political scientist.

And the former Arkansas governor is also facing attacks. An anti-Huckabee advocacy group began airing a TV ad last night featuring the mother of Carol Sue Shields, who was raped and murdered in 2000 by a convicted rapist whose parole Huckabee supported. "If not for Mike Huckabee, Wayne DuMond would have been in prison and Carol Sue would be with us," Lois Davidson says in the ad.

Thompson has been rolling across South Carolina on a bus tour that will continue until the primary, counting on his Southern roots and conservative platform to resurrect what many Republicans consider a lackluster campaign.

"Fred Thompson needs to do well here. It's not a must-win, but it's a must-place, in horse-racing terms," said Oran P. Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, an organization that promotes conservative causes.

Romney wants to prove in South Carolina that his appeal extends to the South. He made his first major speech here in February 2005, and has spent millions hiring staff and running ads. He also has endorsements from South Carolina's other US senator, Jim DeMint, and from Bob Jones III, chancellor of his father's namesake university. But after leading in most Palmetto State polls as recently as November, Romney has lost support as Huckabee, in particular, gained it.

Felkel said Romney's drop in the polls probably influenced his choice to downplay South Carolina and focus on Michigan.

"I would guess he's made the decision that, for all the initial capital he's invested in this state, the return on his investment is not going to be there, which is amazing because three months ago he had the best organization by far," Felkel said.

Terry Sullivan, Romney's South Carolina state director, insisted that Romney has not given up on the state. "We've got a strong organization here that's going to hold on," he said yesterday. "We feel good about where we need to be."

Polls suggest that 20 percent to 25 percent of voters are undecided, and Republicans caution that the race is wide open. The next week, Republicans say, could prove crucial in deciding who emerges as the party's standard bearer, not only in South Carolina, but in other Republican strongholds.

"To be the nominee you have to do well in a base state, and this is a base state," said J. David Woodard, a Clemson University political scientist. "So, whoever does well here is going to send a signal to a lot of other base red states."

*Material from the Associated Press was used in this report. Michael Levenson can be reached at [mlevenson@globe.com](mailto:mlevenson@globe.com). ■*