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HUFFPOST'S **OFF THE BUS**

GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

## McCain Still Failing To Close With GOP Voters

"McCain Can't Close the Deal." If the mainstream media were truly being evenhanded, that's the headline that would appear in newspapers and news magazines around the country. Why? Because even after he became the presumptive Republican presidential candidate on March 4 -- when Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Rhode Island held their primaries and Mike Huckabee dropped out -- McCain can't seem to rally GOP voters behind him. In the past two months, despite McCain's status as the designated nominee, GOP primary voters have delivered significant protest votes to Huckabee and Ron Paul (who has made few campaign appearances), as well as other candidates who ended their campaigns long ago. In states as different as Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and North Carolina, McCain only attracted between 73% and 79% of primary voters -- hardly the groundswell one would expect once the field had been cleared.

In the March 11 Mississippi primary, Huckabee garnered 12.5% of the vote, Paul won almost 4%, while Fred Thompson and Mitt Romney, who had already shut down their failing campaigns in January and February, respectively, each won 1.5% of the vote. This left McCain with only 79% of Republican votes. In the closed GOP Pennsylvania primary on April 22, McCain only won 73% of the vote, while Paul won 16% and Huckabee took 11%.

On May 6 in Indiana, Huckabee won 10%, Paul almost 8% and the long-gone Romney received 5% of the vote. McCain managed to win only 77.5% of the primary vote. In North Carolina that day, the shuttered Huckabee campaign netted 12% of the Republican primary vote, while Paul won 7%, and Alan Keyes, whose never even mounted a campaign and who announced in April that he was leaving the Republican Party, won 2.6% of the vote. McCain captured only 74% of the vote.

There are obviously many Republicans dissatisfied with McCain as their nominee. But you wouldn't know it if you relied on the mainstream media for analysis. Every newspaper, news magazine, and TV and radio political commentator has weighed in on whether Barack Obama can win enough white votes to beat McCain. They all prognosticate about whether the Democrats who supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries will vote for Obama or switch to McCain in November. But there's been hardly any parallel examination of McCain's inability to rally Republicans behind his candidacy, even two months after he was clearly the party's nominee.

There is clearly a strong anti-McCain sentiment among two wings of the Republican Party. The Huckabee voters represent the evangelical part of the GOP. The Paul supporters reflect the strong strain of libertarianism within the party. Although McCain has in recent months maneuvered to win over both wings of the party, and has garnered some support from visible evangelical leaders, many rank-and-file Republican voters still harbor strong suspicions of the Arizona Senator.

McCain's most notable effort to garner evangelical support was his prolonged courting of Rev. John Hagee, pastor of a Texas megachurch, who finally came around to endorse McCain on February 27. But as Frank Rich observed in a recent New York Times column, Hagee's endorsement could cost McCain as many, or more, votes than it could win, especially if the media were doing its job as exposing the minister's outlandish views. (Compare its almost invisible coverage of Hagee with its 24/7 reporting about Rev. Jeremiah Wright).

On several occasions Hagee has said that God created Hurricane Katrina to punish New Orleans for its sins, particularly a scheduled "homosexual parade there on the Monday that Katrina came." Hagee called the Catholic Church "the great whore" and "a false cult system." The Catholic League, which has published a list of Hagee's "slurs" against the church, has called on McCain to renounce the endorsement. How would Catholic voters, especially in key swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico, feel about McCain if they knew that he has refused to reject Hagee's endorsement?

McCain should be equally concerned about whether Ron Paul's supporters will stay within the Republican fold in November. Some pundits might say that Paul's libertarian voters will hold their noses and vote for McCain because they have nowhere else to go, politically. But this is no longer true now that Bob Barr, the extreme right-wing former Republican Congressman from Georgia, and a National Rifle Association board member, announced this week (May 12) that he's seeking to run for President on the Libertarian ticket.

In fact, the Washington Times reported that some Republican leaders are concerned that Barr's candidacy may hurt McCain, especially in some key swing states where a few thousands votes could be the margin of victory or defeat.

The media are often accused of resorting to "horse race" journalism, focusing on poll results and political maneuvering instead of policy issues. In the current presidential campaigns, however, reporters have spent almost all their time at the Democratic race track and, since McCain essentially captured his party's nomination, hardly any time watching the Republican horses. If they had, they may have noticed that many Republican voters are still rooting for other horses besides McCain, surely a sign of a candidate with significant weaknesses. In the Republican horse race, the media seem to be giving McCain a free ride.

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