

THE CONVERSATION



Why South Carolina's Republican primary is such a dirty brawl

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The circus comes to town. Reuters

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After a pile-up in New Hampshire failed to thin this year's field of Republican presidential candidates, the action moved to South Carolina – and the state of the race changed dramatically.

Donald Trump proved his New Hampshire win was no flash in the pan, besting his nearest rivals by a **healthy margin**. Marco Rubio edged out Ted Cruz for second, a major comeback from his disastrous fifth place showing on February 9, while onetime frontrunner Jeb Bush **dropped out** after coming in a poor fourth.

The state has held the “First in the South” primary ever since 1980, and with the exception of Newt Gingrich in 2012, the winner of the state has become the party's presidential nominee.

This primary is a critical indicator of the overall campaign landscape. **South Carolina is more populous and more diverse** than either Iowa or New Hampshire, and plays host to many more black people, veterans, and low-income wage earners. Iowa and New Hampshire don't help us understand how varied demographic groups are voting; South Carolina can.

South Carolina's Republican primary is also known for its dirty tricks and questionable campaign tactics. Damaging rumours proliferate, libellous flyers circulate, and social media is flooded with accusations. As said by Republican South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham: “If you're not ready to play, don't come to South Carolina.”

2000: whisper campaign

During the 2000 primary there were reports of phone calls from an apparent **push poll**: a telemarketing device where callers masquerade as pollsters and try to disseminate (true or false) information, rather than collect it. After asking which candidate the person on the telephone supported, the callers asked John McCain supporters: “Would you be more or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate

black child?" He hadn't.

Attack ads and direct mail joined the phone calls in suggesting that the Republican senator had committed treason while held captive in Vietnam, that he was mentally disturbed and homosexual, and that his wife was a prescription drug addict. Some of these were funded by organisations such as the National Right to Life Committee, the National Rifle Association, and Americans for Tax Reform.



Fighting dirty: John McCain and George W Bush in 2000.

Reuters

In a heavily Christian and racially divided state such as South Carolina, the rumours generated anger, fear, and resentment toward McCain. His campaign received phone calls vilifying his alleged behaviour, telling him to “be ashamed” of his daughter and the colour of her skin (she is actually the McCains' adopted child from Bangladesh).

McCain ultimately lost the state primary to George W Bush, later citing the 2000 South Carolina primary as an impetus for the reinvention of his image in 2008.

2007: a Christmas card controversy

In December 2007, several South Carolina voters who were registered as Republicans received a Christmas card purporting to come from Mitt Romney. The last page included a picture of a temple above a box with the caption: “Paid for by the Boston Massachusetts Temple.”

The card also contained passages from the Book of Mormon, the central scripture of the governor's religion, which illuminated controversial differences between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Christianity. One passage cited Orson Pratt, “original member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles”, as stating that God has multiple wives. Another said that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was “fair and white”.

The director of the Boston Massachusetts Temple was shocked to find out from a South Carolina caller that this card existed. He maintains that the Temple had nothing to do with it.

Romney had already won contests in Michigan and Wyoming, and he won the Nevada race held on the same day as South Carolina's, but he went on to lose the state primary – and the 2008 nomination – to John McCain.

Looking ahead

Such tactics concern many onlookers. Richard Quinn was McCain's campaign strategist in South Carolina. "There used to be a little bit of a code," he said. "There was a line you just wouldn't cross. But I think that line has become very blurred these days. I think winning has become so important that there are no brakes, there's only an accelerator."

This time around, to try to expose new dirty tricks, the Charleston Post and Courier launched a Whisper Campaign website. Visitors can "report underhanded tactics and offensive campaign materials" in the form of written reports, photographs, videos, and phone calls. Reports are checked for content, but not verified for accuracy.



Cruzin' for a bruisein'. Reuters/Joshua Roberts

One citizen's report claims a phone call paid for by Ted Cruz claimed that Donald Trump has a mistress, that his wife took naked pictures, and that they are atheists. Another says that after telling a caller he'd be voting for either Rubio or Trump, he was told that Trump wanted to expand universal healthcare and that Senator Rubio wanted "to bring all the Mexicans in and move them into my neighbourhood".

Some of the callers to Whisper Campaign reportedly identified themselves as being with Remington Research, a consulting firm founded by Cruz's campaign manager, Jeff Roe. For its part, the Cruz campaign insisted it has nothing to do with the calls, and suggested that someone was either pretending to represent Cruz in the calls or inventing false reports for the website.

As South Carolina Republican consultant Joel Sawyer put it: "The hallmarks of the South Carolina dirty tricks are high impact, low tech, high deniability." These efforts prey on issues that already excite many South Carolinians: race, religion, patriotism.

To combat the attacks, the people of South Carolina will have to commit to a different response. As long as the tactics work, people will use them.

This piece has been updated to reflect the results of the primary.



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