

Primary figures: Judgment day in South Carolina

by [J. David Woodard](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

"We set for ourselves one of the strictest, sternest codes in existence," wrote South Carolina native Ben Robertson in his 1942 memoir *Red Hills and Cotton*, "but our country is southern . . . and frequently we fail." Confusion as well as defeat is in the air of this most southern of states as South Carolina prepares to host two key presidential primaries—the GOP primary on January 19 and the Democratic contest on January 26. The winner of the state's Republican presidential primary has won the party nomination every year since 1980.

Central to the outcome for both parties will be the "stern code" that Ben Robertson remembered as his childhood religious heritage. The Christian faith is woven into the social fabric of South Carolina. A Clemson University poll in August found that 66 percent of likely Republican voters and 64 percent of expected Democratic voters attend church each week.

On the Democratic side, African Americans make up about half the primary vote. But statewide polls show Hillary Clinton, who has the backing of major black elected state leaders, some 10 to 15 points ahead of Barack Obama. None of this bothers Anton Gunn, who heads the Obama campaign in the state. "We're in a great position," he says, declaring that his organizing is working "below the radar screen." What he means is that more than 50 paid workers for the Illinois senator are canvassing voters door-to-door in select counties. Obama for President ads are running on 36 African-American radio stations in Democratic counties, and the campaign is gathering endorsements from pastors and city and county council members.

In October the Obama campaign organized a statewide tour of several gospel acts, including that of black preacher Donnie McClurkin, who opposes gay marriage and sang at the 2004 Republican National Convention. Gospel music is one of many ways the campaign is trying to reach out to black evangelicals. McClurkin believes

that homosexuality is a choice that can be cured by prayer, and his view is popular with black voters. Seven artists performed on the gospel tour for Obama in Charleston, Greenwood and Columbia. "We're getting the undecided voters and pushing ahead among African Americans," said Gunn. "We're empowering people at the grassroots."

If Clinton wins in Iowa and New Hampshire, the primary states before South Carolina, she may undermine Obama's grassroots strategy in the state. But one thing is known: the Illinois senator is unrivaled in his capacity to excite crowds. At his first state appearance in Greenville, planners expected 1,500 people; more than 4,000 showed up.

On the Republican side, not since 1988, when George H. W. Bush, Bob Dole and Pat Robertson fought it out, have the faithful been in such disarray. Much of the turmoil comes from the endorsement by Bob Jones III of Mitt Romney. The former Massachusetts governor is prominent on television and supported on radio by the state's popular junior senator, Jim DeMint. If Jones's endorsement of the Mormon candidate raised eyebrows, "shock and awe" might describe the reaction among conservatives to Pat Robertson's backing Rudy Giuliani. The former New York mayor's two divorces, support for gay rights and proabortion views are alien to GOP voters here. From Myrtle Beach to Walhalla and from Charleston to Rock Hill, it looks like the biblical prophecy in 1 Kings 13:3 is being fulfilled: "The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out." The question on everyone's mind is who will lead the faithful.

Former senator Fred Thompson is the odds-on favorite to fill the void. He leads in most polls, though his lead is within the pollsters' margin of error. On a recent frosty November morning he walked into Tommy's Ham House in Greenville to say, "It's mighty good to be back in God's country where folks know what goes into a good breakfast." The campaign rhetoric is important, because in this state over 95 percent of the residents either were born here or come from one of the 11 states of the Old Confederacy.

Thompson fits South Carolina, whereas Giuliani sticks out like a Prius hybrid at a monster truck rally. One GOP activist with a legendary reputation among pro-life groups stood at the back of the restaurant where the former Tennessee senator was speaking and declared, "I don't know much about Thompson, but I'll vote for anyone who can beat Giuliani."

That sentiment is also helping Romney. As for John McCain, he has more endorsements and less momentum than anyone in the field. Clemson University's Palmetto Poll found that nearly one-third of expected GOP primary voters had an "unfavorable" opinion of the man who nearly won here in 2000.

Mike Huckabee, Baptist minister and former Arkansas governor, has the rhetorical style to move evangelicals, but he is underfunded and classified as "second tier" by the national press. Half the churchgoers in South Carolina are Baptists, but that does not necessarily help Huckabee. Baptists "run the gamut from being James Dobson believers to Rotary Club attendees: there is no Baptist bloc," said Oran Smith, the head of the Palmetto Family Council and the author of *The Rise of Baptist Republicanism*.

The religious right in the state, made up of a lot of those regular churchgoers, is adamant about the need for "family values" in Washington. But this issue gets a little clouded when all the top-tier GOP candidates except the Mormon are divorced.

In both parties, the victor may be the one who best accomplishes what Rick Bragg, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from Alabama, called the price of southern salvation. "We all try to buy our way into heaven, one way or the other. Some use the genuine currency of faith. . . . Others . . . try to barter, as if the great Hereafter was a swap meet in the clouds."