

## Is McCain's Return to His 2000 Style of Campaigning Helping Enough?

By - Beth LaMontagne  
(October 15, 2007)



**U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., speaks with voters after an event in Concord.**

The national media may be painting the Republican presidential race as a two-man contest as of late, but U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and his New Hampshire campaign are still hitting the trail hard, aggressively going after rivals on both sides of the aisle.

After his campaign bottomed out this summer, McCain has seen a marked bump in local popularity in the last three weeks. He now has a lock on third place in the New Hampshire primary polls, averaging at about 17 percent. Three months ago, McCain was polling at 12 percent essentially tied with former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., but is now within 10 points of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and within four points of

former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

This weekend, McCain was back in New Hampshire to speak at a global warming summit, attend the New Hampshire Republican State Committee meeting and a number of town hall meetings. Having released a new health care plan last week, McCain touted his conservative initiative that aims to reduce the overall cost of health care, as well as give individuals a \$2,500 refundable tax credit and families a \$5,000 credit toward the purchase of health insurance.

Jim Barnett, McCain's New England regional political director said the senator still has the ability to turn out a large crowd. At recent house parties, the senator drew between 250 and 300 people.

"There is no lack of enthusiasm on the ground," Barnett said.

The campaign is also attracting more attention with the debut of a series of television ads that have been on in New Hampshire for the past two weeks. These ads highlight McCain's military service and time as a POW in Vietnam. They also cost money, an area where the McCain campaign has lagged compared to Romney and Giuliani. Barnett didn't give much credence to critics who say McCain doesn't have enough financial support to effectively campaign against well-financed Republicans through the Feb. 5 states.

"Once you're successful in the early states, the money will come," he said.

Dean Spiliotes, a local political analyst and editor of the blog NH Political Capital, said McCain still has yet to secure a solid block of the electorate. In 2000, it was moderates, but with his perceived courting of the far right, the independent voters who helped him so much then don't trust him now, said Spiliotes. As far as the conservative wing of the party, Spiliotes said they have never trusted McCain to represent their views. His cache with conservative was not helped by McCain's appearance with Democratic New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch this weekend. Both men sang each other's praises, with McCain saying, "I would like to thank you for governing this state in a bi-partisan way. America needs more of what you've done here in the state of New Hampshire."

"He's really kind of getting pinched on both sides," Spiliotes said.

"Some people do see this as a pivot point for [McCain]," he added. "I'm just not sure about that yet. He's certainly in better shape than he was a month ago ... but he has some tough competition with Giuliani and Romney. They just aren't going to step out of the way for him."

When asked about the challenges the McCain is facing, Barnett echoed the theme that has come from the campaign loud and clear in the past few months: McCain is going to do what made him successful in the past. In the senator's last two visits, there has been a return to the small-scale, retail-style events. On his "No Surrender" tour in late September, McCain stayed late at a stop in Concord to mingle with the crowd, shake hands and answer questions. It is clear the campaign wants to remind voters why they fell in love with McCain in the first place.

"I think I've gotten to know the people of New Hampshire pretty well," McCain said to New Hampshire Republicans this weekend. "I know that before I can win your vote, I have to win your respect. And to do that, you expect me to be honest with you about what I believe. You might not always agree with me on every issue, but I hope you know I'm not going to con you. The most important thing we have in this life is our self-respect. And I'm not going to trade mine for anyone's vote or for any office. I'm going to tell you what I believe and let the chips fall where they will. I'm confident New Hampshire Republicans feel the same way about your self-respect as I feel about mine."

McCain has also cranked up the rhetoric, talking tough about the Democrats stance on the war in Iraq and even taking aim at his Republican rivals. McCain regularly holds up the controversial MoveOn.org ad criticizing Gen. David Petraeus and calls on Democrats to denounce it. In a speech to the New Hampshire Republican State Committee this weekend, McCain railed against Romney for claiming he represented the "Republican wing of the Republican party."

Then today, McCain's New Hampshire Vice Chair, former U.S. Rep. Chuck Douglas, R-N.H., went on the offensive against Romney.

"Mitt Romney actively worked to defeat the Republican candidate trying to reclaim my old congressional seat," claimed Douglas. "Therefore, I'm amazed that Romney would claim to represent the Republican wing of the Republican Party because when Romney had a chance to contribute to a New Hampshire Republican, he chose to fund a liberal New Hampshire Democrat instead."

Spiliotes said he sees this strategy as a way for McCain to separate himself from the pack, but speculated that the angry act could eventually backfire and turn off voters.

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