Where Will The McCain Voters Go?

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When the presidential campaign got underway this year, the media were eagerly anticipating the prospect of a moderate on each ticket to challenge the two parties' anointed nominees. The contest might even maintain the high ratings of last year's Monica soap opera.

In the Democratic Party, Bill Bradley, the basketball star, was expected to show so much more joie de vivre than Al Gore, who spoke slowly as though English were his second language. But Bradley turned out to be even more wooden and boring than Gore.

Bradley rejected the media's invitation to run as a moderate and instead positioned himself to the left of Gore. Bradley is thin, but he's not skinny enough for that task because there is precious little space to the left of Gore.

Bradley spent an improbable couple of weeks in a dead-end debate about whether he or Gore is more reliably pro-abortion. Since Gore is pro-abortion enough to get the endorsement of the pro-abortion lobbyists, the nuances were irrelevant.

Being a Rhodes scholar didn't help Bradley, either. Remembering Bill Clinton, this is no time to bring on another Rhodes scholar.

The Bush-McCain battle in the Republican Party was much more interesting. George W. Bush's $50 million head start was matched by an estimated $100 million in free media showered on John McCain.

McCain vs. Bush became a battle of the titans. The corporate establishment joined with the Republican Party establishment to endorse Bush, and the media establishment lined up behind McCain.

It's not hard to figure out why the media jumped on the McCain bandwagon. It's not just because he was so accessible to reporters on his Straight Talk bus.

McCain's campaign finance reform would give the media total control over U.S. elections. His plan would prohibit donations from non-media corporations and their executives, but allow unlimited endorsements and coverage by media corporations.

From the media's perspective, this was a win-win candidacy. McCain's ties to the media were also reinforced by his chairmanship of the Senate Commerce Committee, where he has oversight over the telecommunications industry.

After McCain's media campaign was well under way, it picked up a life of its own. He acquired a following of people attracted by the image of a macho man as a leader with overtones of heroism.

McCain also attracted an anti-establishment constituency of those who think that corporate money has given us one-party government and who resent the way the same corporate CEOs and party bigwigs, who gave us the failed campaigns of Bush the father and Bob Dole, had greased the process for Bush the son.

Amid all the talk about McCain's ability to reach out to new voters, one clear message emerged. The impressive primary victories by a man who calls himself pro-life and has a pro-life voting record conclusively prove that a candidate does not have to be pro-choice to attract moderates and independents to vote Republican.

Things were going well for the insurgent McCain, but on the way to his upset victory, he made a major miscalculation. Perhaps it was on the advice of Warren Rudman, perhaps out of arrogance, perhaps because of anger at his defeat in South Carolina.

McCain thought he could do what the Rockefeller wing of the Republican Party has been itching to do ever since the glory days of Ronald Reagan's victories, namely, cut the clout of the so-called religious right. He knew he would have media support for a frontal assault.

While piously pontificating against negative ads, he launched a phone campaign just before the Michigan

primary accusing George Bush of being in the pocket of anti-Catholic fundamentalists. The media let him get by with falsely denying responsibility for the calls until the Michigan polls closed, after which he admitted paying for them.

Then McCain went to Virginia Beach and made a mean-spirited attack on Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. The attack on Falwell was peculiar, since Falwell has never criticized McCain and his political organization, the Moral Majority, was disbanded over ten years ago.

McCain then compounded his error by implying that Robertson and Falwell are "evil," and made it worse still by saying he was "joking."

This played well with the media and the Warren Rudman wing of the Republican Party who want to drive the Christian conservatives back into their pews. But they are far too numerous and dynamic to be exorcised, and the majority of Republicans found McCain's arrogant self-righteousness intolerable.

McCain had developed his following based on image not issues, and when his image of masculinity and heroism morphed into bitter, angry victimology, he didn't have any issues to sustain his momentum. Only about one percent of voters care about campaign finance reform.

Where will the McCain voters now go? The one theme most of them share is anti-establishmentarianism, but it will be difficult for either Bush or Gore to harness that constituency.