



McCain no longer a maverick in S.C.

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Charleston, S.C. — Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, one of the few prominent South Carolina pols to back **John McCain** in 2000, was struck by how many of those attending a McCain fundraiser last Friday night stood with George W. Bush eight years ago.

Bush's state finance chairman, Bob Royall, was the host of the event.

Two other key Bush financial advisers, Eddie Floyd and John Rainey, were sponsors.

The same money that once rallied against McCain, it seemed, was now gathering on his behalf.

"It's a heckuva a lot better being with you than against," Graham told the 100 influential South Carolina Republicans attending.

Once the outsider, McCain is now the insider in South Carolina.

After months of campaigning as the insurgent — a role he relishes and one that aided his comeback in New Hampshire — McCain now finds himself as the closest thing to the state's establishment candidate.

In South Carolina, McCain today holds a consistent but fragile lead over his nearest competitor, Mike Huckabee.

But a third of likely GOP voters remain undecided only days before voting, according to a Clemson University poll released Wednesday.

Amid this uncertainty, the McCain campaign is operating from an unfamiliar position — that of the party favorite's.

Some in the state are convinced that the local GOP establishment has diminished in recent years. They contend that ideological blocs are more valuable than institutional backing.

Still, McCain has constructed a firewall of endorsements from South Carolina politicians to avoid the sort of institutional resistance that contributed to his defeat here in 2000.

For more than a year, the Arizona senator has quietly and patiently accumulated one local endorsement after another.

Today, McCain's base of local officeholders is at least three times larger than it was in 2000 against Bush. He has at least twice the endorsements of any other Republican candidate.

McCain now has more than 25 South Carolina mayoral endorsements and roughly twice that amount of state legislators.

Many of these political players, like state House Speaker Bobby Harrell, worked for Bush in 2000 and are actively campaigning for McCain across the state.

At the outset of the race, [Mitt Romney](#), [Huckabee](#), and [Rudy Giuliani](#) all courted Harrell.

But when Harrell and his wife, Cathy, met with McCain last winter in a side room of a hotel in Columbia, S.C., Harrell said that the one-time opponent made an effort to put the 2000 election behind him.

"That meeting told me a lot about the man," Harrell recalled. "Because he spoke to me about national security, the threat of Islamic extremist terrorism.

"He turned to my wife and he spoke to her about Internet pornography and MySpace," Harrell continued.

"He understood what issues he needed to talk to me about, and he understood what issues he had to talk to Cathy about."

The Harrells decided to endorse McCain on the drive home.

Perhaps more critically, the elected commander of the state's National Guard forces, Stan Spears, is also backing McCain.

In 2000, Spears was a key reason Bush won some veterans from McCain, a Vietnam war hero. Now Spears' son is running McCain's veterans outreach, a strategic voting bloc McCain is relying upon.

McCain received yet another endorsement Wednesday from renowned social conservative Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn, who announced his support in Greenville, the heart of South Carolina's Bible Belt.

Coburn did not back McCain in 2000 — nor did the South Carolina's largest newspaper, The State, which recently endorsed him.

Still, there is some question as to how much the establishment imprimatur actually matters this time around.

There is no one with the stature of former Gov. Carroll Campbell, the architect of the modern South Carolina Republican party, who delivered for Bush in 2000. Campbell passed away in 2005.

And the state's best-known pols are themselves divided.

While Graham is aligned with McCain, South Carolina's other Republican senator, Jim DeMint, has endorsed Romney.

Gov. Mark Sanford, an early and strong supporter of McCain in 2000, has declined to back

him, or any other candidate, this year.

While McCain has amassed more party support than his competitors have, the various ideological factions within the state party have not coalesced behind a single candidate.

A chief McCain rival here, Huckabee, has great appeal to evangelical voters.

But there are indications that Fred Thompson, who is making his last stand in South Carolina, is siphoning some of Huckabee's support from the so-called "values voters."

Giuliani lags far behind in the polls here — behind even Ron Paul in the Clemson poll.

Then there is Romney, who has attempted to downplay expectations here, but is fueled by momentum from his Michigan primary victory.

The McCain campaign believes that Huckabee's foreign affairs inexperience accentuates McCain's national security credentials in a state where that is no small concern, while McCain adviser Mark McKinnon argues that Romney's shifts on key issues underscore McCain's character appeal.

"The best setup is to have an opponent who reflects exactly your opposites," said McKinnon, who worked with Bush in 2000 and 2004. McKinnon added that Romney was "the Republican John Kerry."

One skeptic of the effect of McCain's endorsements is David Woodard, a pollster at Clemson.

"It's put more people on the stage when McCain has an event," he said. "There may be 450,000 voting, and that means that McCain has 48 more to start off with than Huckabee. They may be able to get their wives to vote for them."

Yet for South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster, who remained neutral in 2000 as the state party chairman, Bush's push-back against McCain was effective precisely because it was based in statewide party support.

"That's why then-Gov. Bush won in 2000," McMaster said, who now stands with McCain. "[Bush] had the establishment. He had a bigger team and a better-organized team."

One thing is certain: South Carolina is again pivotal to McCain's fortunes. As he seeks to regain his footing after a disappointing second-place finish in Michigan, a win here would propel him into immediate front-runner status in Florida, where, for the first time this year, multiple polls now place McCain atop the field.