

GOP '08 hopefuls turn out; Candidates make pitch to party faithful

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Main Edition

TOM BAXTER

Memphis --- The presumed front-runner dodged it, Sen. Trent Lott dissed it, and George Bush finished in a tie for third.

But the race for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination got off to an unofficial start Saturday night as Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, the home-state favorite, won what's likely to be the first of several presidential straw polls.

The highly unscientific but closely watched vote capped a weekend in which more than 2,000 Republican activists from the South and Midwest gathered at the Peabody Hotel --- famous for the ducks that parade in and out of the lobby every day --- to hear speeches by most of those mentioned as possible '08 contenders.

In the final tally, Frist finished first with 36 percent, Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney was second with 14 percent, and Virginia Sen. George Allen tied for third with a surprise write-in: President Bush.

Sen. John McCain of Arizona --- considered by many the front-runner but concerned about being upstaged on Frist's home turf --- had urged delegates to write in Bush's name rather than vote for him.

"He's our president, and he's the only one who needs our help today," said McCain, who has sought to minimize his differences with Bush, his bitter rival in the 2000

presidential primaries. McCain got 5 percent of the vote.

The proceedings kicked off Friday with Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee playing a version of Chuck Berry's "Memphis" on the piano.

"I'm the designated driver here. I'm the only one not running for president," he said.

Over two days the Republican faithful heard pitches from Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, Sen. Norm Coleman of Minnesota, Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, Sen. George Allen of Virginia, Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, and McCain.

Of the most widely mentioned possibilities, only former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and New York Gov. George Pataki didn't come.

As they were reminded many times, Republicans face tough midterm elections at a time when Bush's approval rating is at the lowest level of his presidency. So all the possible '08 contenders went to pains to show they weren't campaigning prematurely.

"We're all trying to give the impression that none of us have any ego or political ambition whatsoever," Huckabee said.

The straw poll, conducted by the National Journal's Hotline, was not without a little controversy.

Lott (R-Miss.) suggested Frist might have "rigged" the vote by bringing Tennessee supporters to the event, sponsored by the Southern and Midwestern Republican Leadership Council.

That wouldn't be unheard of in the history of straw polls, if true. But most Republicans approached this weekend more in a shopping than buying mood, so the outcome of the poll really wasn't the main point of the gathering.

"It's a way to have a little fun in the presidential process. As far as I know, nothing's rigged --- we're just here to show our support for the party," said Chris DeVaney, executive director of the Tennessee Republican Party.

Despite the nervousness congressional Republicans have shown over the Dubai ports deal and other recent problems, the party officials and activists who came here to see the new field of contenders echoed the show of support from the podium for the president.

"Ronald Reagan had his bad days, too," said Michigan National Committeewoman Holly Hughes.

Alexander compared Bush to Duke basketball star J.J. Reddick, whose "shots aren't falling, but he's still a good shooter."

Clarke Reed, a pioneering member of the Mississippi GOP, said while the party was, "in all honesty, kind of reeling" from Bush's problems, Republicans were still upbeat about the coming elections.

"The best thing we've got going for us are the Democrats," Reed said.

A number of Republicans voiced the same sentiment. Any concern that Bush's troubles and the scandals that have swept through Washington might hurt the party were muted by confidence that the party had opened a decisive edge over its Democratic rivals.

Alexander said what Republicans were looking for most in a candidate was "a competent leader," and Reed said charisma might not be as important because of the edge Republicans had gained over Democrats.

"It's almost like we don't have to have the guy on the white horse," Reed said.

But Jason Shepherd of Kennesaw, co-chairman of the **Georgia** Young Republicans, said the party was "kind of drifting" and needed an inspirational leader to return it to its core values. He said before the straw poll he was leaning toward Allen, son of the late Washington Redskins coach, with whom "you get a little of that celebrity thing going."