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[14:00 04.24.2009] DEMO [Obama Rally - Intro [World News [04.24.2009 14:00] [TL 1:38]

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - Sen. Barack Obama, bidding to become the nation's first black president, swept to victory in the Iowa caucuses Thursday night over Hillary Clinton and a high-powered Democratic field. Mike Huckabee rode a wave of support from evangelical Christians to win the opening round among Republicans in the 2008 campaign for the White House.

Obama, 46 and a first-term senator from Illinois, scored his victory on a message of change in Washington. Nearly complete returns showed him gaining 37 percent support from Iowans. Former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and Clinton, the former first lady, were in a close race for runner-up.

Huckabee, a preacher turned politician, handily defeated Mitt Romney despite being outspent by tens of millions of dollars, and deciding in the campaign to scrap television commercials that would have assailed the former Massachusetts governor.

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Huckabee's triumph was more robust than Obama's. He was winning 34 percent support, compared to 25 percent for Romney. Former Sen. Fred Thompson and Sen. John McCain battled for third place.

Clinton called Obama to congratulate him, according to aides.

Romney sought to frame his defeat as something less than that, saying he had trailed Huckabee, a former Arkansas governor, by more than 20 points a few weeks ago. "I've been pleased that I've been able to make up ground and I intend to keep making up ground, not just here but across the country," he said.

The words were brave, but already, his strategy of bankrolling a methodical campaign in hopes of winning the first two states was in tatters - and a rejuvenated McCain was tied with him in the polls in next-up New Hampshire.

Iowans rendered their judgments in meetings at 1,781 precincts from Adel to Zwingle, in schools, firehouses and community centers where the candidates themselves could not follow.

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