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CAMPAIGN '08

This might be a call for 'super delegates'

The Democratic nomination appears poised to come down to the 796 party insiders, who are free to vote for whomever they choose. The delegates' importance depends on Florida and Michigan.

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WASHINGTON — In a year that has seen Democratic voters flock to the polls but produce two evenly matched candidates, some party leaders are becoming alarmed that the process for deciding an eventual winner is in disarray, and that the decision may come down not to ordinary voters but to the group of 796 insiders known as "super delegates."

Contributing to the tension is a continuing battle over the roles of Florida and Michigan, which were stripped of their participation in the party's national nominating convention due to a fight with the Democratic National Committee over the primary election calendar.

Now, with the prospect that neither Hillary Rodham Clinton nor Barack Obama will win a clear majority in the delegate count, a discussion is reemerging over whether voters in those states should return to the polls and help pick the nominee, voting this time in an election formally sanctioned by the party.

"We're headed for a train wreck if we don't get this resolved," said Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), referring both to the role of super delegates and to the DNC's decision to penalize his state. "It is a flawed system that has to be changed."

Donna Brazile, who ran Al Gore's 2000 campaign and is herself a super delegate, threatened to quit her leadership post in the party if the nomination were to be decided by insiders rather than the broader group of Democratic voters who have turned out in huge numbers. Brazile, while pleased that the competitive race has invigorated the party, said Friday that she was "deeply worried about our ability to ensure that this is a very smooth process."

The anxiety has risen in the wake of Tuesday's coast-to-coast primaries and caucuses, which left Obama and Clinton nearly even in the delegate count -- leaving strategists in both campaigns to conclude that neither was likely to win the needed 2,025 delegates even after primary and caucus voting ends June 7.

Republicans, meanwhile, have all but crowned a nominee, Sen. John McCain of Arizona.

Now some Democrats are fretting that the GOP can prepare for the general election while Clinton and Obama wage a bitter and personal war for delegates that would end in a swirl of controversy.

DNC Chairman Howard Dean sought this week to calm those fears, predicting that the party would know its nominee by the spring -- even if it requires some sort of deal between Clinton and Obama.

"The idea that we can afford to have a big fight at the convention and then win the race [in November], I think, is not a good scenario," he told the television station NY1 on Tuesday. "I think we will have a nominee sometime in the middle of March or April. But if we don't, then we're going to have to get the candidates together and make some kind of an arrangement. Because I don't think we can afford to have a brokered convention."

Florida and Michigan together account for more than 350 delegates. But at the moment the DNC is refusing to seat the delegations because both states held primary elections earlier than the official party calendar allowed.

With the delegate race so close, the dispute over Florida and Michigan has emerged as a point of contention between Clinton and Obama. Clinton, who won the votes in both states, is demanding that the delegates be counted. Obama disagrees, noting that his name did not appear on the Michigan ballot nor did he officially campaign in Florida.

DNC officials said Friday that the state parties can appeal the ruling to a special convention committee that meets this summer. Or party officials in Florida and Michigan can find a way within the rules to divvy up their delegates between Clinton and Obama. That would require each state to hold hastily arranged caucuses -- a move that some party leaders in both states said was impractical.

Florida officials said they were especially loath to put aside the Jan. 29 primary results, given that 1.7 million Democrats turned out and that both Clinton and Obama appeared on the ballot.

"You can't undo an election with a caucus where you would be switching 1.7 million private ballots with maybe as many as 50,000 attending a caucus," said Nelson, who has endorsed Clinton. "That just is not going to work, especially in a state that is so sensitive about having the right to vote and having it count as intended."

Another senior Democrat, Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, issued a similar statement Friday, noting that 600,000 Democrats voted in that state's primary and that it "would not be practical or fair to throw out the results of that election."

Adding to the friction is the role that so-called super delegates are entitled to play at the party's national convention in Denver, set for August.

Both campaigns are now focusing intensely on those 796 insiders -- Congress members, governors, state party chairs and DNC members from each state -- who could play kingmaker at a competitive convention. Those super delegates are free to vote for the candidate of their choice, regardless of the outcome of nomination contests in their states.

It is a behind-the-scenes campaign that is far different than the lofty discussions of healthcare and global warming that punctuate the public debate, focusing instead on the specific political needs of each undecided super delegate.

U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), for example, is phoning colleagues in competitive House districts -- arguing that Obama, with his ability to draw independent voters, is a far more useful name to have heading the slate than Clinton.

"It's your choice," Wexler says he tells lawmakers. "If you want Sen. Clinton at the top of the ticket, then go with her. But if you want Sen. Obama at the top of the ticket, then you should be with him now."

Clinton has tapped longtime advisor and operative Harold Ickes, who is quickly compiling dossiers on all uncommitted super delegates -- mapping out the lobbyists, fundraisers and friends who can make a personal appeal on Clinton's behalf.

"This is very personalized, very much one-on-one," Ickes said. "We try to find people who have close personal or close political relationships with the super delegates."

The strategy worked with one DNC member from California, Rachel Binah, a retired bed-and-breakfast operator in rural Mendocino County, who had been determined to stay uncommitted after her first choice, Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico, dropped out of the race.

But then the phone started ringing -- first from the head of the powerful EMILY's List political action committee; then from Chelsea Clinton, the senator's daughter; and then from the senator herself. And Clinton knew that Binah cared most about the environment and about funding research for Alzheimer's, the disease that took her father.

"I was very moved about the fact she knew so much about me and about what was of concern to me," Binah said.

The super-delegate process appears to benefit Clinton, with her family's long-standing political connections. She leads among declared super delegates, about 270-170 -- a lead that includes the vote of her husband, former President Clinton, who gets a vote as a "distinguished party leader."

For many super delegates, the choice will come down to more parochial interests.

"I have to think about who is in the best position at the top of the ticket to win races for us up and down the ballot," said Jerry Meek, chairman of the state party in North Carolina, home to a competitive governor's race this year. "The view here is that we would like a candidate that we can actually embrace and who won't hurt us at the state level."

The tradition of super delegates was adopted in the 1980s as party leaders and elected officials looked for ways to maintain their influence over a national convention. DNC officials Friday defended the practice, arguing that many of the super delegates are grass-roots activists.

But the closely fought contest between Clinton and Obama is making some super delegates uneasy. Some do not relish the idea of deciding the nominee after millions of Americans have already voted.

Tennessee state party chairman Gray Sasser is fretting over the idea that insiders will "get in the back of some smoke-filled room and decide it."

"I'm still hopeful this will be decided like every other nomination in recent history," Sasser said.

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