

Obama sweeps Potomac primaries, deepening Clinton's crisis

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13 February 2008

Illinois Senator Barack Obama swept Tuesday's three Democratic presidential primaries in the states of Virginia and Maryland and the neighboring District of Columbia. The results put Obama, who has long been portrayed as the challenger, clearly ahead of the former front-runner, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, in terms of both popular vote and delegates pledged to support his nomination at the Democratic National Convention in August.

The results, spelling the eighth defeat for Clinton out of eight Democratic primaries and caucuses held since the February 5 "Super Tuesday" contests, have increased doubts about the viability of her candidacy.

Exit polls indicated that the decisive Obama victory in Virginia—63 percent for Obama compared to 36 percent for Clinton—included sizeable majorities for the Illinois senator among those sections of the electorate that the Clinton campaign had previously claimed as its base. The polls showed Obama winning 60 percent of the female vote and racking up a clear majority among both Hispanic voters and working class voters of all races.

According to exit polls, 59 percent of voters who said they made less than \$50,000 a year voted for Obama, as did 62 percent of those who said someone in their household belonged to a union. Roughly 90 percent of the African American vote went to the Illinois senator, along with nearly 70 percent of votes cast by young people.

In Washington, DC, a city with a majority African American population, Obama beat Clinton by better than a three-to-one margin. In Maryland, where a judge ordered polls kept open for an extra hour-and-a-half because of severe weather and traffic jams leading to the polling stations, exit polls showed Obama leading Clinton by close to a two-to-one margin.

On the Republican side, the putative front-runner, Senator John McCain of Arizona, narrowly squeezed out a victory over his challenger, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee. McCain barely won half the votes cast, reflecting the deep fissures within the Republican Party and hostility within its right-wing and Christian evangelical base to McCain's candidacy.

Voter turnout in the US capital and the two states was expected to set new records for primary contests, with Maryland officials projecting close to 40 percent voter participation and reports of voters having to wait as long as 45 minutes because of crowded polling places in Virginia. As in previous primaries, the turnout for the Democratic primaries was roughly double that for the

Republican ones.

As elsewhere, the days leading up to the so-called Potomac primaries saw large turnouts, particularly by younger voters, in support of Obama. On Sunday night he drew an estimated 18,000 people to the Virginia Beach Convention Center, while on Monday about 20,000 packed the Comcast Center at the University of Maryland.

Obama's speeches to these mass rallies have, in the wake of last week's "Super Tuesday" primaries, tacked to the left. In addition to trying to cast himself as an antiwar candidate—despite his repeated votes to fund the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan—Obama has increasingly appealed to the economic grievances of the electorate and engaged in anti-corporate rhetoric, linking the massive profits of the oil companies to the rising cost of gasoline.

By contrast, Clinton appeared before considerably smaller audiences, the largest of which comprised about 1,000 students at Maryland's Bowie State University. On Monday, she spoke to a more or less captive audience of workers, managers and union officials at a Maryland General Motors transmission plant.

The primaries demonstrated the way in which the Democratic Party establishment is split between the two candidates. In Maryland, Clinton campaigned together with the state's governor, Martin O'Malley, as well as Maryland Senator Barbara Mikulski.

For his part, Obama enjoyed the backing of Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine—a co-chairman of his campaign, whom he publicly promised a post in his potential cabinet—while in the District of Columbia he campaigned together with Mayor Adrian Fenty.

Obama has increasingly attempted—particularly in his speeches to mass audiences—to portray his candidacy as some kind of anti-establishment insurgency and his campaign as a social movement. Speaking on Monday night, he said, "I started from scratch and was up against an operation that had been built over the course of 20 years by a former president with the bulk of the Democratic establishment on their side, and after setting up a hundred-million-plus operation with hundreds of employees around the country; it looks like we've played them to a draw so far."

The reality is that the senator from Illinois is himself backed not only by substantial sections of the Democratic Party establishment, but also by powerful interests within America's financial elite. This has found clearest expression in the sharp shift of campaign funding towards his campaign, which recently reported collecting approximately \$1 million a day—twice the amount flowing into

Clinton's coffers—after setting a record by taking in \$32 million in January.

Within these circles, Obama's candidacy is seen as an opportunity to effect a shift in foreign policy aimed at shoring up US imperialist interests threatened by the disastrous results of the policies of the Bush administration, particularly in the Middle East. His candidacy is also seen as a means of channeling growing social discontent and keeping it within the safe confines of Democratic Party politics.

Clinton went into Tuesday's primaries with her campaign already shaken by defeats suffered over the weekend in five separate contests. In the Louisiana primary, as well as in caucuses in Washington State, Nebraska, Maine and the US Virgin Islands, she lost to Obama by wide margins.

The air of crisis around the campaign of the New York senator and former first lady was compounded by financial woes and a sudden shakeup in her top staff. Clinton was forced to loan the campaign \$5 million of her own money after it had exhausted its war chest.

Reflecting tensions over the string of losses and dwindling cash, campaign manager Patti Solis Doyle—a close Clinton aide since the Clintons occupied the governor's mansion in Little Rock, Arkansas—resigned and was replaced by Maggie Williams, who served as chief of staff for Hillary Clinton at the White House in the 1990s.

The shuffle at the top provoked a new race-based controversy in the party, with several prominent Latino Democrats expressing concern that the Clinton campaign was removing Solis Doyle, a daughter of Mexican immigrants. "She might be playing with fire with the Hispanic community," New York State Senator Ruben Diaz Jr. told the Associated Press.

He, together with another elected Latino state official, wrote a letter of concern to the Clinton campaign, and said, "I just wanted them to know that we are not innocent, to believe that the person resigned on her own."

Clinton's political handlers have pointed to the candidate's strength among Hispanic voters—evidenced particularly in her win in California—as one of her remaining advantages over Obama.

The replacement of the campaign manager was followed Monday by the resignation of the deputy campaign manager, Mike Henry, who said he was stepping aside in deference to the new campaign team.

The Clinton campaign has more or less written off the other primaries scheduled this month—in Hawaii and Wisconsin—which are likely to bring to 10 the number of consecutive primary and caucus defeats in the wake of "Super Tuesday." Clinton is staking the fate of her nomination on March 4 contests that will be held in Texas and Ohio. The New York senator was speaking to a rally in El Paso, Texas Tuesday night as the media reported her defeats in the Potomac primaries. A failure by Clinton to convincingly carry both states next month is seen as probably fatal for her campaign.

Given the proportional distribution of delegates across congressional districts and statewide, it is becoming increasingly certain that neither candidate will win enough delegates before the August Democratic National Convention in Denver to guarantee them the nomination. As a result, both sides are battling to win

votes that are not up for grabs in the primaries and caucuses.

Both Clinton and Obama are courting the support of former Senator John Edwards, who dropped out of the Democratic nomination race after losing in the South Carolina primary last month. Each of them hopes that Edwards could swing to their side some 40 delegates pledged to him.

Clinton met with Edwards last Thursday in North Carolina, while a scheduled meeting between Edwards and Obama was cancelled Monday for unexplained reasons. Both candidates are rumored to be offering Edwards a post in a future Democratic administration, including a possible appointment as attorney general.

Intensive efforts are focused on the so-called "super delegates"—nearly 800 elected officials and party functionaries—who are not bound by the primary results. Thus far, Clinton has enjoyed a large lead among those super delegates who have committed to either candidate. Such delegates, however, can shift their allegiances to conform with the prevailing political winds.

Obama declared in a television interview this week that it would be unfair if these super delegates negated the results of the primaries. "We've got to make sure that whoever wins the most votes, the most delegates, that they are the nominee," he told the Washington, DC ABC affiliate WJLA. "I think that it would be problematic if either Senator Clinton or myself came in with having won the most support from voters and that was somehow overturned by party insiders."

Democratic Party National Chairman Howard Dean expressed the same sentiment last week. If neither of the two enjoyed a clear lead coming into the convention, he said, "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; that would not be good news for either party."

The evident fear is that, should Clinton fail to pull ahead decisively in the upcoming primaries and also refuse to bow out, the convention could become the scene of bitter public in-fighting, potentially convincing millions more Americans of the undemocratic character of the entire political system based on the domination of a financial elite represented by two big business parties.



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