

Decision on Michigan, Florida delegates

## Democratic Party establishment lines up behind Obama

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A panel of Democratic Party leaders came down on the side of Barack Obama, the frontrunner for party's presidential nomination, in a battle with supporters of Hillary Clinton over how to seat delegates to the presidential nominating convention from two contested states.

The Rules and Bylaws Committee of the Democratic National Committee voted to seat full delegations from Michigan and Florida, but to give each delegate only half a vote rather than a full vote, the penalty imposed because the two state parties violated national party rules by scheduling their primaries too early.

The agreement to seat the Michigan and Florida delegations with half-votes means that 4,235 delegate-votes will be cast at the Democratic convention, raising the total required for a majority from 2,026 to 2,118. After the allocation of the two states delegates, Obama had 2,057 to Clinton's 1877, leaving him only 61 delegates short of the nomination.

While Clinton won Sunday's primary in Puerto Rico easily, taking two-thirds of the vote in an extremely low turnout, Obama picked up at least 14 more delegates there, out of a total of 55. He is expected to win a narrow majority of the 31 delegates to be selected Tuesday in South Dakota and Montana, and enough votes from as-yet-uncommitted superdelegates to claim the nomination by Wednesday.

Clinton's principal spokesman on the rules committee, campaign adviser Harold Ickes, denounced the Michigan decision bitterly and declared that Clinton reserved the right to challenge the action at the national convention in Denver.

However, Howard Wolfson, a top Clinton advisor, suggested to the *New York Times* that the campaign has

no stomach for taking the fight to Denver. "Our focus is on securing the nomination for ourselves in the near term," he said. "I don't think anybody is looking toward the convention to end this process."

The Democratic Party establishment by-and-large rallied to Obama. After the committee meeting, a parade of top Democrats announced their support for its decisions, including DNC chairman Howard Dean and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Pelosi suggested that Obama would likely clinch the nomination June 3.

There was an enormous degree of political posturing over the rules committee hearing. All of the Democratic presidential candidates had supported the national party in the dispute and agreed not to campaign in either state. Clinton declared last fall that any votes cast in either state primary "would not count," but she reversed herself after falling behind Obama in the race for delegates in February.

Clinton had won both states, taking 50 percent of the vote in Florida compared to 33 percent for Obama and 16 percent for John Edwards, who was still in the race at the time of January 29 primary. She won 55 percent of the January 15 vote in Michigan, while 40 percent voted for an unpledged slate, the only alternative available for Obama or Edwards supporters since both candidates had taken their names off the ballot.

Under rules approved by the Democratic National Committee last year, the two state parties were to be penalized by the loss of all their delegates to the convention, 300 pledged and 67 unpledged, for a total of 367. Each state party appealed and the Rules and Bylaws Committee heard arguments on Saturday and then made its decision.

In each case, the state party organizations proposed a

penalty of the loss of half their votes—the same penalty imposed by the Republican National Committee on its Michigan and Florida delegations—rather than a reduction to zero. The Obama campaign backed this approach, since it cut Clinton’s delegate margin in the two states by half.

Clinton supporters initially sought to seat the Florida delegates with full votes, eliminating any penalty, but this was defeated by a 15-12 vote on the Rules and Bylaws Committee. This was followed by a unanimous 27-0 vote to seat Florida with half votes, with the delegates divided among Clinton, Obama and Edwards according to the primary results.

The case of Michigan produced protracted wrangling over how to divide up the state’s 128 pledged delegates (who will cast 64 total votes), because Obama’s name was not on the ballot. There were three different plans.

The Clinton campaign demanded 73 delegates based on its share of the popular vote, with the remaining 55 delegates unpledged rather than awarded to Obama. The Obama campaign proposed an even split of the delegation, 64 for each campaign, essentially arguing that the primary was invalid. The Michigan state party—where Clinton’s supporters outnumbered Obama’s—proposed a compromise between the two, with 69 delegates for Clinton and 59 for Obama. This was the plan adopted, by a 19-8 vote of the rules committee.

Since 13 of the members of the rules committee are publicly committed to support Clinton for the nomination, this result was a debacle for her campaign. At least five of her own supporters refused to back her position on Michigan. According to several members of the rules committee, Obama supporters on the committee actually had a narrow majority for their plan to split the Michigan delegation 50-50, but decided to make an overture to the Michigan state party by accepting its plan instead.

The decisiveness of Clinton’s defeat is indicated in the following figures: Clinton’s initial demand, for full votes for both states and denying the uncommitted Michigan vote to Obama, would have given her a net gain of 111 delegates. Obama’s initial position, half votes for both states, and a 50-50 split in Michigan, would have left Clinton a net gain of 19 delegates. The actual result hewed very closely to the Obama position, giving Clinton a net gain of only 24 delegates, far too

little to change the outcome of the race.

The prominent Democrats on the rules committee who sided with Obama Saturday included former national chairman Don Fowler of South Carolina, a Clinton supporter; former Secretary of Labor Alexis Herman (in the Bill Clinton administration), who chaired the committee; James Roosevelt, grandson of President Franklin Roosevelt, the committee co-chair; and Donna Brazile, the campaign manager for Al Gore in 2000. The last three are still formally uncommitted.

The usually obscure rules panel met under conditions of unprecedented media attention, largely because of the spurious and demagogic effort by the Clinton campaign to suggest that enforcing party rules to which she herself had agreed was the equivalent of the Republican Party’s theft of the 2000 presidential election in Florida.

In a series of campaign appearances in Florida leading up to the rules committee hearing, Clinton outlandishly compared her demand for delegates to the civil rights movement, the nineteenth century struggle for the abolition of slavery, and the current political crisis over the presidential election in Zimbabwe.

The only similarity between the 2008 primary dispute and the 2000 presidential vote is the geographic accident that Florida is involved in both cases—a fact that was flogged endlessly by the same Democratic politicians who capitulated spinelessly to the electoral coup by the Supreme Court and the Republican Party in 2000.

Moreover, Clinton was using the “every vote counts” mantra to justify a primary election in Michigan in which Democratic voters had no alternatives because her main rivals were not even listed on the ballot.

There were no issues of democratic principle involved in this internecine conflict, which simply confirms Clinton’s defeat and the coalescing of the Democratic Party apparatus behind the Obama campaign.



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