



Party is democratic in name only

Just how democratic are the Democrats? The power of the Clinton brand may yet prevail, writes Geoff Garrett

UNITED States President George W. Bush calls his opposition the Democrat Party because he doesn't think they are any more democratic than his Republicans. The convoluted process determining the Democrats' candidate for president is grist for Bush's mill.

Barack Obama's momentum since Super Tuesday makes him the solid favourite to win the nomination over Hillary Clinton.

But it is delegates rather than votes that will determine the nomination, and Obama has only secured just over half the 2025 delegates he needs.

Obama will not win enough pledged delegates to secure the nomination before Denver's Democratic National Convention in late August, unless Clinton pulls out of the race. It would probably take Obama's winning two of Ohio and Texas next month and Pennsylvania in April for Clinton to consider withdrawing.

Absent defeats in these states that play to Clinton's strengths among Latino and working-class voters, the New York senator can justify staying in the race by the ongoing closeness of the delegate count. Headlines about Obama "wins" invariably belie much closer delegate counts because the Democrats use a form of decentralised proportional representation to translate votes into delegates.

But Clinton's claim to remain a viable candidate rests on three dynamics of dubious democratic merit.

First, Obama has dominated the

mostly small caucus states, relying on tiny bands of motivated activists. He and Clinton have essentially split the larger primary states where voting is open to all registered Democrats and often to independents as well.

Clinton gained more than 3 million votes in winning the biggest prizes of all, California and New York, fully 10 times as many votes as all those who have caucused for Obama in 12 states.

Second, as it stands today, Clinton will not be able to count the clear majorities of delegates she won in late January primaries in two large states, Florida and Michigan.

These delegates aren't accredited by the Democratic National Committee, the governing arm of the national party, which is punishing the Florida and Michigan state parties for holding their primaries "too early".

Respecting DNC wishes, neither Clinton nor Obama campaigned in Michigan, and only Clinton's name appeared on the ballot.

Both their names were on the Florida ballot and both campaigned there. More than 2.2 million people took the contests sufficiently seriously to vote in the Florida and Michigan Democrat primaries.

So is it fair to punish voters in Florida and Michigan because of a spat between their respective state parties and the DNC?

Clinton supporters certainly think not. They are threatening to take their case to court unless the DNC relents and this may bring back haunting memories for Democrats of the Supreme Court's ruling on Florida's "hanging chads". It was this ruling that finally sealed the presidency for George W. Bush in 2000.

But Clinton's best chance to win the nomination doesn't rest with Florida and Michigan. It rests instead with the 800 super delegates — fully one-fifth of all those who will vote at the national convention — who are not bound by the results of any state primary or caucus.

The power of the super delegates is

the final and least democratic feature of the Democrats.

These delegates — sitting Democrats in Congress, state governors, various party officials and former office holders like Bill Clinton and Al Gore — are bound to do nothing other than support the candidate they think is their party's best.

In straw polls, Clinton presently has the support of close to two-thirds of super delegates who have expressed a

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preference between the two Democrat presidential candidates. And even if Obama comes to the convention with a substantial lead in regular delegates, the power of the Clinton brand among establishment Democrats could give her the nomination.

Of course, Democrat grandees know that this course of action could have the potential to undermine crucial party unity if they were to choose to ignore the will of the party rank and file.

They might also be swayed by notional November polls showing that Obama would do better against the Republicans' John McCain.

No matter how it works out, the super delegates will decide who to crown as the Democrats' king or queen this electoral season.

For a party that prides itself on its democratic values, this is a disturbing situation that will probably have ramifications far beyond 2008.

Professor Geoff Garrett is the incoming CEO of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and a political scientist at the University of Southern California.



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