



# Heavy toll of the polls

A Clinton exit would not end the Democrats' problems, writes **Geoffrey Garrett**

**E**VEN though the US Democratic Party's bizarre nomination process means that Barack Obama cannot seal the deal without Hillary Clinton throwing in the towel, Obama's victory in North Carolina and his stronger than expected showing in Indiana mean that he will be the party's nominee barring a spectacular gaffe, revelation or world event.

With apparent light at the end of the interminable primary tunnel, with the economy and Iraq playing into their hands and with President George W. Bush's unpopularity plumbing unprecedented depths, why are Democratic leaders and strategists so worried?

The answer is revealed in opinion polls conducted against the backdrop of the primaries. Recent exit polls show that somewhere between one-third and one-half of Clinton supporters say they would not vote for Obama against presumptive Republican candidate John McCain, with Obama's supporters only slightly more generous towards Clinton. At the same time, notional general election polls show McCain at least even with either of his potential opponents.

These polls are the ultimate testament to the damage the primaries' internecine warfare has inflicted on the Democrats and to the importance of repairing it before November.

If they succeed, the political upside for the party is very high, and the effect on the US's role in the world may be substantial.

This election year could strengthen the swing back in the political pendulum towards the Democrats that began in the 2006 congressional elections. It could also result in an expedited end to the Iraq war, an increased US focus on Afghanistan and a restoration of the US's standing in the world.

All this is far less certain today than it seemed to be before the first primaries and caucuses in January. The core of the Democrats' problem is that Clinton and Obama have two different constituencies whose fault lines are largely the product of the country's openness to the world: globalisation and immigration.

For the US's bicoastal urban professional elite and for young people in the country's better colleges and universities, globalisation is an

unalloyed good that is generating unprecedented economic opportunities.

Obama's pan-national, pan-racial and post-partisan message appeals naturally to these, and would-be, Davos jetsetters.

But globalisation is not so enticing for less educated and older Americans living in small towns and cities in the centre of the country. They hanker for a bygone era of steady, well-paying jobs with generous health and retirement benefits. Clinton resonates with them as a lifelong battler fighting for middle America against the evils of global capitalism.

On the other new political fault line, Latino immigration is eclipsing the centuries-old black-white American racial epic. Latinos are the US's largest minority, comprising one in six Americans. And their numbers continue to grow, fuelled not so much by immigration from Mexico and the rest of Latin America as by high birthrates among Latinos already in the US.

The emergence of this Latino power has caused friction with African-Americans. On the one hand, blacks are concerned that Latinos are taking their jobs and usurping their political influence. On the other hand, predominantly Catholic Latinos look down on African-Americans for allowing the traditional family to collapse in their communities.

This racial divide is nowhere clearer than in the Democratic primaries. Obama consistently wins more than 80 per cent of the African-American vote, but Clinton beats him two to one among Latinos. Obama is seen as a black elitist candidate against Clinton's battling everyman whose appeal is restricted to whites and Latinos.

The Democrats' holy grail — a candidate who could unite the party by simultaneously respecting the struggles of African-Americans, connecting with the aspirations of Latinos, feeling middle America's pain and allowing the global elite to soar — would be unbeatable.

Bridging apparently unbridgeable divides has been the key to the US's epoch-changing politicians, from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to Ronald Reagan and his Reagan Democrats. Will 2008 be another such year, this time for the Democrats? It depends on whether Obama can recapture the magic of January and February's primaries before the only votes that really matter on the first Tuesday in November.

Transcending conventional political divides in a time of crisis has always been Obama's game plan: the "audacity of hope", as he titled one of his books. He did not want to engage in the kind



of political and policy triangulation that he found impossible to admire in Bill Clinton. Instead, Obama wanted to stand above the fray of politics as usual and focus on what united people rather than on what divided them.

It was the fact that Obama's "yes, we can" audacity of hope seemed genuinely to move many Americans that led even the most wizened Democratic insiders to get excited about Obama's candidacy. In him, they saw a path to regaining the kind of Democratic hegemony the party has not known in 40 years, not only winning elections but also setting the terms of the political debate.

Unfortunately for the Democrats, that was months ago, before the brutality of the primary campaign stripped away layer after layer of Obama's transcendent lustre.

Today, Obama is a much more conventional

and beatable candidate, one with obvious weaknesses that McCain will try to exploit in the coming months. Obama is not only portrayed as black and elitist, the Republicans will also tell anyone who will listen that his voting record in the Senate places him at the extreme left-wing of the Democratic Party.

To win in November, Obama will need to go back to the future, to become again the candidate he was in the heady days and weeks after January's Iowa caucuses. Having Clinton out of the way would certainly help, but Obama will need to do much more.

The Democratic base is fractured. Putting the pieces back together will give Obama his best shot at beating McCain.

Geoffrey Garrett is chief executive of the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.