



Opinion

Public celebrations hide private consternation over the new nominee



GEOFFREY GARRETT

Barack Obama has finally been crowned as the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee for president. But while his historic win is justly being celebrated, party insiders are secretly worried about his chances against the Republican, John McCain.

Hillary Clinton has clutched at three straws for her nomination. Last Saturday's decision by the Democrats' rules committee to count only half the delegates from the disputed Florida and Michigan primaries removed her first straw ("I was robbed"). Her big win in Puerto Rico on Sunday kept another straw in play ("I won the popular vote").

But her final argument for staying in the race is much more important because of its implications for McCain-Obama in November. "I do better than Barack Obama in big swing states Democrats need to take back the White House," Clinton has said repeatedly. And based on the evidence, she is right.

Obama's ability to bring new voters to the polls has been widely celebrated, and to Democratic strategists his ability to put in play previously solid Republican states like Colorado and Virginia is at least as important. It is his poor showing in big swing states like Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania that is causing Democrats to contemplate the unthinkable.

Obama might not get to the White House because he can't seem to close the deal in middle America, despite the unpopularity of President Bush and Iraq, the parlous state of the US economy, and McCain's age, temper and

limitations on the stump.

The Democrats' sensible split-the-difference resolution to the vexed issue of Florida and Michigan, which held their primaries earlier than the national party allowed, snuffed out her first reason for staying in the campaign.

Clinton's second grievance has been that, on some counts, she has beaten Obama in the popular vote even though she has lost the delegate count. There are two reasons for this apparently undemocratic outcome. Obama's domination of the caucus states, with small numbers of highly motivated participants, was sustained on small vote totals. In contrast, Clinton fared best in large states with lots of voters.

After five months of primaries and caucuses that bruised not only the candidates but also the party, there will be considerable soul-searching among Democrats about reforming the process before 2012. But the rules of the game were clear before the primaries began, and Obama won fair and square on the only indicator that matters, delegates.

Clinton's best argument for fighting on has big implications for the presidential election in November. Whereas Obama piled up wins in states the Democrats will almost certainly win or certainly lose, she won the pivotal states on which a close election will turn.

Most analysts believe Obama has to win at least two of Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania to get into the White House. He lost all three to Clinton in the primaries, by sizeable margins. More troubling for Democrats, Obama is

doing considerably worse than Clinton in opinion polls against McCain in all three states and losing to him in two.

Unfortunately for Clinton, the Democratic grandees who comprise the super-delegates ignored her electability argument. They feared the backlash, particularly from all those new young Democrats energised by Obama, that would surely have come had they overturned the pledged delegate count.

But that does not mean they are not concerned about his electability. Behind closed doors they are worried sick by Obama's poor showing in those states that have thwarted Democratic presidential ambitions in recent elections.

McCain may choose the Governor of Florida, Charlie Crist as his running mate, hoping to lock up that state. Obama will be tempted to counter with the Governor of Ohio, Ted Strickland, to win that state, even though Strickland would do nothing for Obama's vulnerabilities regarding his lack of national security experience.

The race for the Democratic nomination is now all over bar the shouting. But Clinton's best argument for staying in the contest to the end - Obama's poor showing in key swing states - is the big story behind the celebrations. Democrats thought the road to the White House would be a cakewalk. Now it looks like a dogfight.

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