



Candidates speak as race nears end

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There are 31 delegates at stake in today's primaries in South Dakota and Montana.

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TROY, Mich. — Democratic front-runner Barack Obama offered Monday to meet rival Hillary Clinton “at a time and place of her choosing” as the Democrats prepared to end their five-month-long marathon of primaries and caucuses.

Obama suggested that he'd get the 2,118 delegates needed to nominate after South Dakota and Montana voters go to the polls today.

He picked up five more superdelegates Monday, and South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn was reportedly about to join the list. In addition, many of the 17 uncommitted Senate superdelegates were said to be ready to throw their support to him later this week.

“We feel good about the number of superdelegates that we have been accumulating,” Obama said after campaigning in this key general-election state, “and my sense is that between Tuesday and Wednesday that we've got a good chance of getting the number that we need to win the nomination.”

Today's South Dakota and Montana primaries are the final stops in a political endurance test that now has Obama with 2,074 convention delegates to Clinton's 1,917.

That leaves the Illinois senator 44 short of the number needed for nomination, with 31 delegates at stake today.

Clinton sent mixed signals Monday about her post-primary intentions, telling patrons of a Rapid City restaurant “we're going to make our case to all of the delegates,” but also scheduling her election-night rally today in New York. The New York senator usually holds election night events in the day's key primary state or at a politically symbolic site.

Speculation is rising that Clinton may concede defeat as early as tonight or later this week as previously undeclared superdelegates commit to Obama, putting him over the top.

Obama plans to appear in St. Paul, Minn., tonight, at the Xcel Energy Center, where Republicans will gather for their national convention in September.

Monday, he described his conversation with Clinton, whom he'd called a day earlier to congratulate on her victory in the Puerto Rico primary.

"I emphasized to her what an extraordinary race that she's run," he said, "and said there aren't too many people who understand exactly how hard she's been working."

He told her that "once the dust settled, I was looking forward to meeting with her at a time and place of her choosing. We've still got two more contests to go, and I'm sure that there will be further conversations after Tuesday."

Obama skipped the primary states Monday, instead addressing a rally in Troy, Mich., one of the Detroit suburbs likely to be a fall election flash point.

Michigan has been an important part of the Democratic presidential equation for years — it last gave its electoral votes to a Republican in 1988 — but presumptive Republican nominee John McCain is making inroads there.

The latest EPIC-MRA statewide poll, taken May 19-22, found McCain with a 44 percent to 40 percent lead over Obama, and the Arizona senator is running particularly strong among independent voters.

Obama also could be hurt by the just-resolved Democratic fight over how to seat Michigan's convention delegates. Clinton's forces are angry over the rules committee's decision Saturday to give delegates to Obama, who like most other major Democratic candidates took his name off the January ballot.

Clinton won that primary, and in order to bring her supporters back to support Obama, "She has to be in the forefront and abate this," said Michael Bernacchi, a professor of marketing at the University of Detroit Mercy.

In Troy on Monday, Obama concentrated on economics, noting that the state has had an unusually high unemployment rate and putting much of the blame for the problem on President Bush.

"You are working harder for less. You are paying more for everything," he said. "To me, that is not great progress, that is a cause for concern and an impetus for change."

The McCain camp fired back, with top adviser Carly Fiorina saying that "Michigan is clearly a state that needs a break from excessive taxation and Senator Obama instead continues to talk about higher taxation."

Obama generally wants to lower taxes for the middle and poorer classes while raising them on the wealthy.

While he and McCain's camp dueled, Clinton focused her attention Monday on the primary states. She visited with patrons at Tally's Restaurant in Rapid City, telling them she was "grateful that we kept this campaign going until South Dakota would have the last word."

Clinton vowed to keep fighting beyond today, though she didn't say how long she may continue the battle.

"We're over 300,000 votes ahead in the popular vote," she said, "and slightly behind in delegates, but we're going to make our case to all of the delegates as to who would be the best president, and, number two, who would be the stronger candidate against John McCain."

The exact popular vote count is difficult to determine; it depends on which states are counted and how those votes are totaled.

Clinton faces a struggle in today's primaries. In Montana, a Mason-Dixon Polling Research survey May 19-21 found Obama ahead by 17 percentage points.

"You're going to see the same kind of schism that you've seen in other late primary states," said Brad Coker, the

firm's managing partner.

Clinton should do better in the eastern part of the state, which is heavily populated with farmers and ranchers. But in western Montana, where more state government and university workers live, Obama should prosper.

South Dakota has much the same makeup, and a Dakota Wesleyan University survey in April gave Obama a big edge. He has one big advantage in the state: Most of South Dakota's leading Democrats, notably Sen. Tim Johnson and former Sen. Thomas Daschle, are behind his candidacy.

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