

Tensions rise in Democratic contest as Obama nears nomination

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Nine Democratic superdelegates announced their support for the presidential campaign of Senator Barack Obama Friday, the largest number of such new delegate pledges since the February 5 “Super Tuesday” primaries, giving Obama his largest delegate lead yet over Senator Hillary Clinton, his rival for the nomination.

Obama has erased Clinton’s lead among superdelegates—the elected officials, members of the Democratic National Committee and state party leaders among whom she once dominated, as the early frontrunner and presumptive nominee.

Since winning ten straight primaries and caucuses in February, Obama has, throughout the ups and downs of the past two months, maintained a lead of at least 100 among the delegates elected in primaries and caucuses. After the May 6 primaries in North Carolina and Indiana, an Associated Press tally showed Obama with 1,846 delegates to Clinton’s 1,688.5, counting both elected delegates and superdelegates.

Obama campaign officials said they will reach a majority of all elected delegates by the time of the Oregon and Kentucky primaries on May 20. After that point, a Clinton victory would require an overwhelming majority of the remaining uncommitted superdelegates to line up to support her against the candidate who won the majority of the primary and caucus delegates.

Both the Democratic Party establishment and the mass media have declared Obama the all-but-certain presidential nominee. When he visited the floor of the House of Representatives on Thursday, in an effort to woo the estimated 70 uncommitted members of Congress, he was hailed as the de facto presidential choice of the Democrats.

Five Democratic members of the House of Representatives declared their support for Obama in the last few days, including one, Donald Payne of New Jersey, who was previously committed to Clinton. The others were from North Carolina, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii. Other superdelegates included at least two who were previously pledged to Clinton, as well as John Gage, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, the biggest union of federal workers, which endorsed Obama Thursday.

Several current and former leaders called for the Democratic Party to rally behind Obama. The 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, who had endorsed Clinton, announced he would now back Obama and urged Clinton to withdraw. Former President Jimmy Carter said that if the superdelegates blocked the nomination of the candidate with the most elected delegates, popular votes and total states—i.e., Obama—“It would be a catastrophe for the party.”

David Bonior, former House majority whip and campaign manager for the presidential campaign of John Edwards, gave his support to Obama, while Edwards himself, in several television interviews after the primary in North Carolina, his home state, said that Obama was the likely nominee and had the best chance of beating Republican John McCain in the November election.

Former congressman Leon Panetta, who was chief of staff in the Clinton White House, said Obama was now the presumptive nominee, adding, "I think there's a time now where she needs to concede and unify the party."

Another former Clinton White House aide, Congressman Rahm Emanuel, now one of the top Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives, said Friday that Obama had to be regarded as the "presumptive nominee." Emanuel, from Chicago, had been neutral in the presidential contest.

The rapid erosion of support within the Democratic Party establishment—reflected also in the drying up of campaign contributions—has produced an increasingly hostile and belligerent response from the Clintons and their campaign aides.

Clinton revived the question of the disputed primaries in Michigan and Florida with a letter to Obama arguing that delegates from these two states should be seated despite the state parties' violation of national party rules requiring them to schedule the primaries no earlier than February 5. Both Clinton and Obama agreed to abide by those rules and Clinton had acknowledged that the primaries were invalid until it appeared likely she would need the delegates.

Clinton campaign aides acknowledged, however, in a conference call with the media Wednesday, that even if Clinton received delegates corresponding to her popular vote in Michigan and Florida, she would still be well behind Obama in total delegates.

Hillary Clinton gave an extraordinary interview Wednesday to the newspaper *USA Today*, in which she declared, "I have a much broader base to build a winning coalition on," and went on to cite a press report "that found how Senator Obama's support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans, is weakening again, and how whites in both states who had not completed college were supporting me."

The barely concealed appeal to racial prejudice contained in this remark is quite striking, suggesting as it does that black, Hispanic and other minority workers should not be included in the category of "hard-working." Republican politicians, while deliberately appealing to such sentiments over the past 40 years, have usually been careful to avoid specific references to skin color, substituting code words about "law-and-order" and "family values."

Clinton claimed that her emphasis on white voters was not an appeal to racial divisions, telling *USA Today*, "These are the people you have to win if you're a Democrat in sufficient numbers to actually win the election. Everybody knows that." The next day she repeated the reference to "hard-working Americans," but dropped the adjective "white," instead describing her base of supporters as including "Catholic voters, Hispanic voters, blue-collar voters and seniors—the kind of people who Senator McCain will be fighting for in the general election."

Clinton's tacit appeal for a white voter backlash against Obama, the first African-American

with a serious chance to win the nomination of the Democratic or Republican parties, produced a considerable—and harshly negative—reaction in the media and among many Democratic Party officials and delegates.

Congressman Charles Rangel, a Clinton supporter and one of the longest-serving black congressmen, told the *New York Daily News*, “I can’t believe Senator Clinton would say anything that dumb.” Former senator and presidential candidate Edwards told MSNBC that he disagreed with Clinton’s comment and that Clinton needed to ask the question, “Where are the lines?” that should not be crossed.

Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson, a liberal Obama supporter, commented, “Here’s what she’s really saying to party leaders: There’s no way that white people are going to vote for the black guy. Come November, you’ll be sorry.” Why would white working class Democrats refuse to vote for Obama? he asked. “The answer, which Clinton implies but doesn’t quite come out and say, is that Obama is black—and that white people who are not wealthy are irredeemably racist.”

The mounting tensions in the Democratic Party establishment were expressed Tuesday night during the primary election coverage on CNN. Commentator Paul Begala, a former top campaign official for Bill Clinton, dismissed Obama’s supporters, declaring, “We can’t win with eggheads and African Americans.”

Commentator Donna Brazile, an African American superdelegate and former campaign manager for Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore in 2000, retorted, “You insult every black blue-collar Democrat by saying that. So stop the divisions.”

While the conflicts within the Democratic Party establishment have taken the form of appeals to race and gender, there are significant political differences at stake, particularly in the area of foreign policy.

The Obama campaign has the support of those sections of the Democratic Party leadership and the ruling elite as a whole who have concluded that the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, and more generally its unilateralism and injudicious application of military force, have produced a disaster for American imperialism, isolating the United States and weakening its global position.

An Obama presidency, they believe, would give the US ruling elite the opportunity to present a different face to the world that could revive illusions in its democratic pretensions, not only internationally but within the United States as well. Clinton, linked as she is to the Bush administration’s policy by her vote to authorize the war, cannot play such a role.

Obama and the forces within the ruling elite who support him by no means oppose militarism as an instrument of US foreign policy. Indeed, Obama has called for a strengthening of the American military. However, they believe a more astute imperialist policy is necessary, one that combines military force with more far-sighted diplomacy and efforts to repair Washington’s tattered international alliances.

As Obama made clear in his interview last Sunday on “Meet the Press,” and again Thursday in interviews with CNN and NBC, he opposes the war in Iraq as a waste of resources that should be redeployed to Afghanistan and other areas of vital concern to the American ruling class, not only in the Middle East but in the Far East, Africa and Latin America.

Obama is particularly sensitive to suggestions—both from the Clinton campaign and from Republican candidate John McCain—that he would downgrade the close relationship between the United States and its principal client in the Middle East, Israel.

The Democratic frontrunner visited the Israeli Embassy Thursday for a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel, at which he was introduced by Sallai Meridor, Israel's ambassador to the US. Addressing the audience, he hailed the "bond between the people of Israel and the people of the United States," adding that "America's commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable."

Obama reacted sharply to the claim by McCain that the Islamic group Hamas favors his campaign, calling the suggestion "offensive" and a "smear." He told CNN, "My policy toward Hamas has been no different than his. I've said that they are a terrorist organization, that we should not negotiate with them unless they recognize Israel, renounce violence, and unless they are willing to abide by previous accords between the Palestinians and the Israelis."

One of Obama's principal advisers on Middle East policy, former Clinton White House aide Robert Malley, announced Friday he had resigned any role in the campaign because of attacks on his meetings with Hamas officials. Malley works for the International Crisis Group and met with Hamas as part of its efforts to mediate conflicts in the Middle East, but Zionist groups have publicly attacked Obama over Malley's activities. Malley told NBC News, "I decided based on the fact that this was becoming a distraction that it was best that I remove myself from any association with the campaign."

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