
Democrats take to towns: Candidates woo votes on Republican turf

By Michael J. Mishak

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Hillary Clinton in Pahrump?

Barack Obama in Elko?

Bill Richardson in Fernley?

At first blush, the pairing of those Democratic presidential candidates and rural Nevada towns is jarring. Democrats have typically avoided the historically Republican strongholds - and for good reason.

In 2004 President Bush beat Sen. John Kerry by 50 percentage points in many rural counties. State Sen. Dina Titus, vowing not to repeat Kerry's mistake and ignore the "rurals," spent considerable time in the hinterlands during her gubernatorial campaign last year, only to lose her bid without a single rural county in her column.

And yet the rurals have become an unexpected battleground for Democrats seeking to win the Nevada caucus next year.

In addition to making the flurry of recent visits, all the top-tier candidates, including former Sen. John Edwards, have dedicated staff to rural outreach and some have even opened rural campaign offices. The reason is part strategy, part media play.

Although 89 percent of Nevada's Democrats live in Las Vegas and Reno, the state Democratic Party has weighted the caucus system slightly to help the rural counties. A Democrat's vote in Eureka and Esmeralda counties, for instance, is 10 times more valuable than one in Clark and Washoe counties. Still, those rural counties have fewer than 200 Democrats, which means the two major metro areas will have 85 percent of the delegates.

Nevertheless, candidate visits to rural areas dominate local headlines, often for the better part of a week.

At their core, the rural visits are smart politics: With the entire field competing fiercely in the Las Vegas and Reno areas - and presumably splitting the Democratic vote, the candidate with the biggest rural operation could snag victory.

Beyond that, candidates are laying the groundwork for the general election. Nevada and the Intermountain West have emerged as the battleground for 2008, and polls show rural America more competitive now than at any other time since the 1996 presidential election. Although Bush carried rural areas by a wide margin in 2004, exit polling shows rural voters split evenly between the parties in last year's midterm elections.

Democrats say the presidential caucus has given rural voters a reason to turn out. Republicans, on the other hand, have not matched that level of voter excitement so far.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney drew just 300 onlookers in Elko this month on his first public campaign visit to Nevada, about one-third as many as turned out for Obama. More surprisingly, Clinton drew 2,500 to a roller-skating rink in Pahrump, about one-third the number of registered Democrats in Nye County.

"They're smart to be getting out there," said Jill Derby, chairwoman of the state Democratic Party. She should know. A native Nevadan with rural roots, Derby came within 5 percentage points of beating Republican Dean Heller last year in the state's 2nd Congressional District, an area with a 47 percent to 34 percent Republican edge in registered voters.

Derby said vigorous campaigning and the district's independent-minded voters combined to win her support. But just showing up, she said, played a big part. "They like to meet somebody. And if they meet somebody, that's the deal for a lot of them."

That seemed to be the case last week in Fernley, a booming town about 30 miles east of Reno in Lyon County. Richardson, the governor of New Mexico, packed a high school auditorium in what local officials called the town's first-ever visit by a presidential candidate.

Mayor Todd Cutler pronounced himself giddy. Charles Lawson, chairman of the Lyon County Democratic Central Committee, then endorsed Richardson.

In Pahrump, Clinton drew a capacity crowd to the rink. Across the street and adjacent to the Precious Slut tattoo parlor and the Eve 'N Keel Tavern, the visit attracted about 10 Republican protesters outside holding signs that read "Hillary.Commie" and "Pahrump Welcomes Hillary, Brothels Welcome Bill."

Inside, Clinton won the endorsement of the county school district superintendent, as the fire marshal turned away dozens of residents. Clinton declared herself overwhelmed by the crowd. "I want to go to the White House with Pahrump, Nevada, in my column," she said.

Days later, her campaign opened an office there.

Still, the campaigning is about more than just face time, Derby said. Candidates must do their homework on local issues. "To the degree that people can feel like he or she is one of us, knows our issues and is a down-home person, that makes a difference," she said. And no one is working that angle more than Richardson, the sole Westerner in the race.

"I'm like you: a Westerner with values," Richardson told a crowd of about 100 in Fernley last week. "It seems every time that we're in one of these presidential debates one of those very snotty anchors gets up and says, 'Gov. Richardson, I noticed that you have an A - minus rating from the National Rifle Association. How do you explain that?' I say: 'I'm a hunter. I'm a Westerner.' This is something that in the West is a way of life. I'm not a criminal. I am somebody who values the Second Amendment."

Richardson called for a national water policy and pledged to create a Cabinet-level position on the issue. He said the government should play a greater role in solving traffic congestion by promoting light rail. Also, Richardson boasted about Nevada's potential for alternative energy production and said the government should offer tax incentives to companies that move to rural areas.

By contrast, Clinton spoke largely about national issues, although she also mentioned Nevada's potential for renewable energy. "We could have solar farms from Las Vegas to Pahrump," she said to big applause. Later, when given the

chance to ask questions, the crowd focused for the most part on national issues.

Aides from the leading Democratic campaigns say the intense preparation for rural questions has often been for naught.

"I think people are deeply concerned about the war, the health care crisis, schools and school resources," said David Cohen, deputy campaign manager for Obama's Nevada campaign. "Those things transcend a lot of rural versus urban boundaries."

Obama was the first to open a rural outpost - in Elko - and included the Republican bastion on a nationwide tour of rural communities this month. Obama spoke in Elko about energy policy, citing what locals were paying for a gallon of gasoline, which is nearly 30 cents more than the national average. "That makes a big difference when you're driving 50 miles round trip to your job, like some folks around here are," he said.

Edwards is the only Democratic candidate without a rural visit, but his campaign manager David Bonior visited Elko last month. Aides say the campaign is busy laying the groundwork for a stop.

John McNally, who did rural outreach for successful Montana senatorial candidate John Tester last year, is Edwards' rural coordinator in Nevada. Last week he found himself sipping lemonade with local Democrats in Fernley a day after Richardson's visit.