

DESERET
Morning News

Demo hopefuls light fire under Utah, U.S. voters

Historic race energizes Utah party members

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Deseret Morning News

Published: February 1, 2008

Democrats, in the GOP stronghold that is Utah, have a new spring in their step.

"We're very excited and very energized," said former U.S. Rep. Bill Orton. "Not only about a Democratic win in the presidential race but a historic Democratic win — with either the first woman or the first African-American president in the White House."

It's not only that Demos have two historic, interesting candidates, says Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah. "Add to that the unprecedented success in raising money for the party and a mostly unpopular president, and the result is probably the most optimistic Democratic core we've seen in decades."

Following the lackluster speaking style of 2004 Democratic challenger John Kerry and the arguably boring presentation of Al Gore in 2000, Utah Democrats are giddy with the engaging, inspiring styles of both Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

"We like all of our candidates," said Alan Seim, stepping out of a Young Democrats of Utah luncheon Thursday. "We just feel that it's really time for new ideas and new leadership. It's a great time to be a member of the Democratic Party."

Seim was largely uninvolved in politics until 2006. With the war, social issues and his own challenges in his field as a social worker, "I was fed up with where things seem to be headed in the country."

So he went to work, not in Utah, but for a candidate hundreds of miles away in Missouri. When Seim's candidate won a nail-biter against the incumbent he was hooked on politics.

Today Seim is one of many party organizers who have come out of the woodwork to knock on doors, volunteer, stuff envelopes or get involved in some other way.

"We've got young people who are energized right now," said Sen. Gene Davis, D-Salt Lake. "As a parent and as a grandparent when I see this happen with young people, I get excited, too."

"We find a lot of energy for Hillary, but we find a tremendous amount of energy for Obama," Davis said. "He's lit a fire among young people that we haven't seen for many, many years."

Attendance at political events is up. Volunteers are up. Optimism is running high.

Chelsea Clinton was in Utah this week. Obama was scheduled to come Saturday but respectfully deferred so as not to interfere with the funeral planned for LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley. Obama's wife, Michelle, will pinch hit for him in Utah on Monday instead.

"I think there is real excitement about seeing that we can change things in 2008," said Donald Dunn, who's running Clinton's campaign in Utah.

Students of both parties are markedly more involved than in 2004, Jowers said. More than 1,300 students participated in a straw poll recently at the University of Utah.

"It's a huge change from 2004, he said. "Students then were either apathetic or choosing the lesser of two evils almost. In 2008, there is great enthusiasm about the four remaining viable candidates," Jowers said.

The fundraising factor is an important one to consider among Democrats in Utah, Jowers explains. Historically Republicans always outpace Democrats in filling party coffers.

"But Democrats have reversed that trend, demonstrating that they're are willing to put their money where their mouth is," he said.

The only complaint from Utah's Democratic faithful to Clinton and Obama: Quit bickering. Lay off the bad-mouthing. Hillary Clinton needs to get a leash on Bill. Obama shouldn't take the bait.

"All the people I hear say they wish they'd just stick to issues," Orton says. "It throws a wet blanket on the historic nature of it."

But Seim isn't surprised to see the candidates ramp up the rhetoric, especially in a squeaker like this.

"It's something I'd rather not see, but I am excited that both candidates have a passion for not only their views but for being the leader of the United States," he said. "That passion is actually a great thing."

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