

Campaigns gear up for N.C.

Obama edging Clinton in state polls

BY ARIEL ZIRULNICK
ASSISTANT STATE & NATIONAL EDITOR

With only 135 delegates dividing Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, delegate-rich North Carolina suddenly matters in a very big way.

The state has 115 delegates up for grabs in the May 6 Democratic primary, and it is the last major stop before the Democratic National Convention in August, when the party will choose its nominee.

Clinton's campaign is scrambling for votes because Obama began his N.C. campaign with a double-digit lead in the polls.

"We've seen that Sen. Obama has a strong base of support here," said Carly Lindauer, spokeswoman for Clinton's N.C. campaign.

"We know that we have an uphill battle, but we are looking forward to fighting it."

Obama's advantage comes from the presence of large blocs of voters who have been bastions of support

for him in prior contests.

North Carolina's black population, about 30 percent of the state's Democrats, is a significant advantage, UNC journalism professor Leroy Towns said.

Obama also has a distinct advantage in the growing metropolitan areas of the Triangle and Mecklenburg County. The large blocs of well-educated, affluent residents there are expected to follow the pattern of earlier primaries and swing in his favor, said Director of the UNC Program on Public Life Ferrel Guillory.

Clinton's consistent advantage in past contests among white manufacturing workers could carry over to farmers and other agricultural workers, an important voting bloc in North Carolina.

"There's a good number of Democrats in rural areas," Guillory said, adding that the Clinton campaign has courted that vote much more aggressively than Obama.

The overwhelmingly white western rural areas are expected to fall more heavily to Clinton's camp than the eastern region, which has a sizable black population.

The central Piedmont region is more competitive because it lacks a predisposition toward either candidate, UNC political science professor Thad Beyle said.

Regardless of location, the economy will be the central issue.

Manufacturing and agriculture have been hit hard, but the state has weathered the blows better than many others, largely because of expansion in other economic sectors, Guillory said.

"This state has proved, I think, more resilient," he said. "We're still growing."

The national recession is hitting the urban populations with skyrocketing gas and food prices.

The entire state, not just its economy, is immersed in a tremendous transition.

"A generation ago, a candidate would come to North Carolina and talk about tobacco," Guillory said,

adding that candidates would portray themselves as more conservative than they actually were.

Now, with a rapidly evolving economy, a strong university system and an influx of people from Latin America and around the country, N.C. Democrats are becoming more mainstream.

"The N.C. Democratic coalition is not that different from the national Democratic coalition," Guillory said.

Across the country, Democrats are worried that the battle of words, unlikely to abate anytime soon, will irreparably damage the party's chances in the general election.

However, Guillory said the campaign has been good for the country and for the candidates.

"It's been bruising, but I think the country needed to know more about Obama. I think the country needed to think more deeply and get a better sense of Hillary Clinton," he said.

Contact the State & National Editor at stntdesk@unc.edu.



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