



Clinton camp begins 11th hour effort

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Sen. [Hillary Rodham Clinton's](#) campaign has begun an eleventh hour effort to implore Democrats to support her by framing her as the strongest general election candidate the party could put forth. In a memo and conference calls this week with reporters, senior advisors argued that she was better prepared to defeat [John McCain](#), the presumptive Republican nominee.

Aides to Clinton are also hoping to raise anxieties over Sen. [Barack Obama's](#) electability.

Clinton's chief strategist Mark Penn ratcheted up the debate in recent days by convening a rare two conference calls in three days with reporters to underscore the campaign's focus on which Democrat can win in November.

"The kind of independent support that [Obama] had so far would evaporate relatively quickly once he faced the Republicans because of them filling in the totality of his record," Penn said on Monday.

Two days later, after Obama's eighth straight victory, Penn told reporters: "Winning Democratic primaries is not a qualification or a sign of who can win the general election. If it were, every nominee would win because every nominee wins Democratic primaries."

True enough, but that statement left Penn in an awkward position. After all, the surest means to convince voters you can win is by, well, winning.

"If your argument is 'vote for me because I'm going to win,' which is the heart of the electability argument, it's very difficult to make if you're losing," said Tad Devine, who was John Kerry's chief strategist during the 2004 race.

To a Democratic party that has been shut out of the White House for 20 of the past 28 years, including the last eight, the question of electability is no small matter. Failure to win the presidency in 2008 would be a crushing blow to the party, one that would hardly be ameliorated by the reelection of Democratic majorities in the House and Senate.

All of this puts a premium on the ability to compete in November in the broadest number of states.

"Each campaign is going to paint a picture where the other campaign is not as electable, within the dynamics of trying to win the nomination they have to do that," said Cincinnati Mayor Mark Mallory, a Democratic superdelegate who has not endorsed either candidate.

Clinton's electability argument begins with this premise: She survived the attacks of a tough, take-no-prisoners "Republican machine" and is still standing. Obama, according to

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this line of thought, has yet to face such withering opposition and his record is rife with vulnerabilities for Republicans to exploit.

As one prominent Clinton ally argued: "Once Barack Obama is put through the meat grinder, the numbers are going to look very different than they look right now."

Further, Clinton could rally female voters in the general election. She is more popular with Hispanics, a key voting bloc, and is an experienced veteran of national campaigns after her husband's two successful runs. She could also more effectively neutralize McCain's advantage on experience and national security issues.

Obama's case begins with the breadth of his primary victories. His strategists point out that his

wins are broadly distributed across the national landscape, in states small and large. He has won in largely white states and also in heavily black states, in places holding primaries and in those holding caucuses, in red states and in blue states.

"Obama has the ability to energize the base of this party, the likes of which we haven't seen in several decades," Obama strategist Cornell Belcher said. "But at the same time [Obama can] capture the imagination of the Reagan Democrats, the children of the Reagan Democrats, give them pause, and bring them back home to the Democratic Party."

Obama's campaign argues that he stood against the war in Iraq from the outset, which will offer voters a stark contrast with McCain, the presumptive nominee. And that's not the only stark difference: the 46-year-old Obama is considerably younger than the 71-year-old Arizona senator. Obama has spoken consistently of McCain in campaign speeches. The implied strategy is to help voters envision Obama as the nominee.

Obama also generates tremendous enthusiasm among young voters and African-Americans. His supporters argue that since independent voters tend to gravitate to him, Obama will be able to expand the playing field — in other words, he can put more states in play for a party that in the past has struggled in wide swaths of the country.

He is better for fellow Democrats down ticket, supporters say, noting that Clinton would unite the Republican base.

As one Obama senior aide argued: "She starts off with half the country not wanting to vote for her, and that's not going to get better."

"I would give Obama the advantage [on electability]," Devine said.

“What he accomplished beginning in Iowa and really going back to last year with the fundraising is nothing short of remarkable. He has demonstrated that he is a very powerful candidate and has a very powerful message. He can deliver it with a lot of energy on a sustained basis. That he has run a really disciplined and organized campaign. And that he has the ability to tap into a level of resources never before matched in American politics.”

However, Devine disagrees with the notion that Clinton’s negatives are too high.

“There is time for her to gain a lot of altitude in terms of her favorability,” Devine said, adding that he also believed Clinton could increase the turnout of women.

Aides to Obama are keenly aware that movement candidates like him have at times been undone by pragmatic appeals like the one Clinton is making. Gary Hart, who like Obama rallied young and upscale Democrats, was overtaken late in the race in part because the Democratic establishment rallied behind Walter Mondale, who was seen by many as the more electable option.

Four years ago, the same electability argument contributed to John Kerry’s victory over insurgent Howard Dean.

Obama currently wields the only empirical evidence: polling. That fact has escaped few in his campaign.

Three straight polls have shown that Obama fares significantly better than Clinton against McCain in head-to-head match ups. In the past week, polls by USA Today-Gallup, AP-Ipsos, and Time magazine peg Obama with a 3- to 7-point edge over Clinton in the contest with McCain, no small advantage considering most presidential elections are won at the margins.

But polling done this early in the race remains an imperfect measure of electability.

A Politico analysis of Gallup’s head-to-head polls of the party’s presumptive nominees, all surveyed around the same period, found that they called the winner correctly five times (1972, 1984, 1988, 1996, and 2000) and twice incorrectly (1992 and 1980). In 1976 and 2004, polls had the race tied at this point.

Penn has waged his argument with recent history, rather than polls (an Obama aide argued it was because the polls did not aid his case). As Penn points out, both Kerry and Al Gore were waylaid by Republican criticism. Few non-aligned strategists will say for certain the same playbook could not work on Obama.

Carter Eskew, a former Gore adviser, agreed that relatively little is still known publicly about Obama. Should Obama win the Democratic nomination, he believes Republicans would attempt to rapidly define him.

“This was true of Michael Dukakis in 1988,” Eskew said. “The Republicans found in 1988 that people had no idea about the Dukakis record in Massachusetts, his ideology, and they went about systematically, as Penn says, trying to destroy him. It’s a different game 20 years on but I think the point still has some validity.”

“On the other hand, Obama has this tremendous upside,” Eskew continued. “He could really be a galvanizing force and he could transcend some of the physics that have existed in our politics.” Eskew remains unsure which candidate is stronger in the general election.

One high-ranking Democrat, a Clinton partisan who asked that his name be withheld in order to speak candidly, said that he believed “Republicans are going to have a lot to work with” if the nominee is Obama.

“It won’t just be the National Journal ranking,” the party insider continued, referring to the magazine’s recent ranking of Obama as the most liberal senator in 2007. “It will be his votes in the Illinois state Senate that nobody’s really looked at all. It will be personal stuff, the issues that he raised himself in his book around drug use, all that stuff that has been basically off limits.”

Yet he quickly added that if Obama “rises above that stuff” and can “make them look ridiculous, then God bless him and he’ll win hands down.”

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