

Taking sides

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

So, whom have you endorsed for president? No one yet? You're kidding. You had better get on that. Everyone else is doing it. It's the battle of the endorsements. Newspapers typically endorse one candidate over another, but that practice is usually reserved for the general election. This year, perhaps the presidential races are so contested because there is no incumbent running or even a vice president considered to be the heir apparent to the sitting president.

As usual, Hollywood action stars are having a say. Sylvester Stallone is backing John McCain, while Chuck Norris supports Mike Huckabee.

Meanwhile, members of Congress in both parties are divvying up support between the front-runners: Republicans John McCain and Mitt Romney, and Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. McCain is getting the better of Romney on that score, which is odd given that McCain has a reputation in Congress for not playing well with others. Clinton and Obama have a fair number of lawmakers in their corners, including a number who serve with them in the Senate. That is bound to make things interesting once the campaign is over.

Yet nothing put the issue of political endorsements front-and-center like the announcement this week that Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, the liberal lion, was throwing his support behind Obama. Kennedy has said he has grown increasingly concerned over the Clinton campaign's tactics and specifically the tendency to introduce race into the debate. In fact, Kennedy said he called Bill Clinton to complain and, after what must have been a heated exchange, emerged from the call angrier than he was before he started to dial. So, Kennedy endorsed Obama and even drew comparisons between the Illinois senator and President John F. Kennedy.

If this were any other election, in any other political year, we might dismiss the importance of endorsements. We might even argue that these overtures are outdated and of questionable value.

But this is no ordinary election and no ordinary year. With so much in doubt, and with voters presented with so many choices, endorsements might actually mean quite a bit this time around. If nothing else, they allow elected officials to send a message - not just to voters but to rival candidates and entire political parties.

So what message was Ted Kennedy trying to send by endorsing Barack Obama? It could be this: Racial politics have no place in this election and anyone who stands by those sorts of tactics deserves to stand alone.

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