

End of the beginning?

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Hillary Clinton's campaign could point to many reasons the senator from New York got clobbered in the Wisconsin primary: She spent too little money. She spent too little time. She attacked Sen. Barack Obama on superficial issues (calling for a 19th debate while campaigning in the Lone Star State rang a bit hollow). She went negative for the first time in the campaign. Or the flip side of that: She didn't go negative early or often enough. Stay tuned on that one.

Whatever the cause, this was a missed opportunity for Clinton, who lost here to Obama 58 percent to 41 percent. Wisconsin should have been fertile ground for her campaign. It's a big turnout primary, unlike the caucus states where she has struggled. And it has a working-class electorate worried about the economy and globalization.

Instead, a broad swath of Wisconsin voters seemed to embrace Obama's soaring call for a new politics. The Illinois senator beat Clinton in most demographic categories - even matching her vote for vote among women and cutting into her base among poorer, less-educated and union voters. As in other states, Obama also scored with independent voters.

None of this is good news for Clinton as the contest moves to states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania that in some ways look very much like Wisconsin. Obama had the air of a front-runner Tuesday night, delivering a speech in Houston that seemed to cue up the fall campaign.

Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican nominee, clearly had Obama in his sights. After winning the Republican primary in Wisconsin, McCain warned voters not to be "deceived by an eloquent but empty call for change." But McCain has his own problems, notably a need to shore up the right side of the GOP's big tent. He got 55 percent of the vote here, but former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee still got 37 percent in a race that is all but over. Presented with a choice, the GOP's right wing still delights in rejecting McCain.

McCain may have plenty of time to mend those fences if the Obama and Clinton slog continues past the March 4 primaries in Ohio and Texas. But after Wisconsin voters had their say on Tuesday, it was looking very much like the fall campaign already had begun.

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