Marching to November

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Primary elections on Tuesday consolidated the field of potential presidential candidates and re-energized the dogfight between the Democrats.

The inevitable coronation of Sen. John McCain as the presumptive Republican nominee became reality as he swept the four primaries, and Gov. Mike Huckabee withdrew. The Republican Party now will focus on fundraising, organizing and strategy while the Democrats continue battling for delegates and dollars, possibly all the way to their late-August nominating convention in Denver.

McCain promptly emerged from his triumphant night into the embrace of President George W. Bush, who defeated him for the Republican nomination in 2000. The president's strategy aims to solidify McCain's shaky support among core Republicans and the conservative wing of the party, the discontent of which has been undisguised during the primaries and caucuses to date.

McCain's acceptance speech concentrated on the war on terrorism abroad and derided the Democrats for extolling "the failed, big-government mandates of the '60s and '70s."

Locking arms with President Bush, whose national popularity sags among broad categories of Americans because of the continuing war in Iraq and spreading economic hardship, is highly risky for McCain, although it might reassure the party base in the short term.

McCain must extend his passionate rhetoric beyond his military roots and his promises to keep the country safe from terrorists, however. For him to win the White House, he must reach beyond the Republican Party core and speak directly to the plight of Americans worried about joblessness, inadequate health care, housing foreclosures, inflation and rising gasoline prices.

In difficult economic times, voters will be swayed more by their individual fates than by geopolitics. The Arizona Republican must provide detailed plans for how he, a longtime Washington insider, will alter the course of his party's dramatically faltering presidency.

For the Democrats, Tuesday proved to be a watershed for the resurgent campaign of Sen. Hillary Clinton, who swept three of the four states to reverse a string of 12 victories for Sen. Barack Obama. Among her victories was a decisive win in blue-collar Ohio and a narrower one in Texas, both important large states.

In interpreting Tuesday's results, the candidates both offer persuasive - and decidedly contradictory - spins.

Obama touts his overall delegate lead and the total number of states that he has won. His campaign banks on victories in upcoming primaries in the southern states of Mississippi, North Carolina and Kentucky, as well as strong showings in some states with fewer delegates through the last of the primaries in June.

Exit polls showed Clinton reclaiming her base of support on Tuesday by winning among women, blue-collar workers and Hispanics. The Pennsylvanians who will vote in their state's key primary on April 22 resemble many of those in Ohio.

Her campaign points out that although Clinton's victories have been few, they have come in the highly populated, delegate-rich states that Democrats will need to carry to win the White House in November. Obama's many wins have been in smaller states with fewer electoral votes.

Campaign posturing aside, the hard mathematics of delegate counts will determine the Democrats' fate. Obama continues to hold a narrow, fluid lead of fewer than 100 delegates after Tuesday. Clinton is favored slightly among superdelegates - party loyalists who are free to support any candidate they prefer. Despite her rebirth Tuesday, Clinton faces a daunting task to surmount the delegate lead Obama has accumulated through the primary season.

Party officials also are discussing whether to hold new primary elections in Florida and Michigan. After state officials violated national party rules and moved up the dates on which their primaries were held, the party declared that their delegates would not be seated at the Denver convention. Both states are rich in delegates, and if new primaries were held there, they could prove pivotal.

In the meantime, McCain will run against both Democrats while they duke it out between themselves through the summer. The fight could continue until the Democrats' convention in August because neither Obama nor Clinton will be able to claim with certainty the 2,025 delegates required to clinch the nomination.

Republicans relish starting the general-election campaign before spring break. The Democrats tout their record voter turnouts and vow to continue to attract new and independent voters who were idle in recent elections.

All Americans should be heartened by the intense interest in the presidential process. We are living through a vital epoch in U.S. history, regardless of the outcome on Nov. 4.

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