

Uncertainty reigns

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

After another twist in the presidential campaign trail, the contrasts between the Republican and Democratic contests could not be more glaring.

John McCain, dismissed as a political fatality only a few months ago, has obtained the GOP nomination and now can turn his attention and resources to the fall campaign. Meantime, Hillary Clinton, written off just last week by pundits who thought her Democratic bid for the White House was doomed by the Barack Obama phenomenon, has staged another comeback.

The upending of fortunes on the Democratic side was stunning enough to prompt Clinton to suggest Obama might wind up as her vice presidential running mate, even though Obama emerged from this week's primaries with about 100 more pledged delegates than Clinton. In fact, despite winning the popular vote in the big states of Ohio and Texas, Clinton picked up only about a dozen more delegates than Obama did, due to the party's proportional allocation rules.

So, Clinton and Obama will continue their grim sumo match, with neither one likely to force the other from the ring. How long can this continue?

Barring an unexpected change in the dynamics of the race, the struggle between Clinton and Obama could go right down to the Democratic National Convention in Denver in August. That's because neither candidate appears likely to gain a clear majority of delegates after the last primary votes are counted.

This raises the undemocratic prospect of a brokered convention at which the nominee would be chosen by so-called superdelegates. These are 796 top Democratic Party officials, including many elected officeholders. Together, these self-anointed delegates, who are not bound by popular vote tallies, comprise 39 percent of the total needed to win the nomination.

Yet another unpredictable factor in the selection of the nominee is the balloting in Florida and Michigan. These two states defied party rules by holding early primaries. The chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Howard Dean, has declared the results of these two primaries to be null and void. Clinton, however, wants the votes to be counted - because she won both contests. Resolving this dispute is likely to be divisive, whether it involves new elections in Florida and Michigan or a nasty credential battle over rival delegations in Denver. In sharp contrast, McCain now can begin to consolidate the Republican base, including conservative voters who are not happy with his win, and also start to focus on the general election. Still, he faces enormous obstacles - a distinct fundraising disadvantage compared with Clinton or Obama, membership in the same party with an unpopular White House incumbent, and his embrace of an unpopular, and highly unpredictable, war in Iraq.

All in all, the outcome in November suddenly appears more uncertain than ever before.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune â€™ CNS.

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