

Democrat field plants itself in hot Nevada

by John Marelius

LAS VEGAS - This city may be best known for casinos, drive-through wedding chapels and Elvis impersonators, but suddenly it's also become a magnet for presidential candidates.

Seven 2008 Democratic presidential hopefuls showed up at the University of Nevada Las Vegas on Saturday to outline their health care plans. A similar forum last month in Carson City attracted eight.

Traditionally, no one has paid much attention to Nevada in presidential nomination politics.

But thanks to the state's most powerful Democratic politician - Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid - Nevada is almost as big a draw for presidential candidates as it is for Californians looking to shed some of their hard-earned dollars at the gambling tables.

At Reid's instigation, Nevada wedged its Democratic caucuses into a strategic spot between the Jan. 14 Iowa caucuses and the Jan. 22 New Hampshire primary.

The move comes as Democrats are making inroads into the once reliably Republican Rocky Mountain West.

"The future of the Democratic Party lies in the West," Reid said at the recent Carson City forum. "I believe that without any question the Western region is going through a realignment. The Democrats have an opportunity to harness these events and take us to the White House."

Nevada Democrats maintain the Silver State deserves such a prominent role in the nomination process because with a 30 percent minority population, it comes much closer to reflecting the nation's diversity than Iowa and New Hampshire.

They also contend the early caucus will force presidential candidates to address issues of concern to the West: water, public lands, mining, immigration.

"They're going to stop here instead of just flying over," said Tom Collins, chairman of the Nevada Democratic Party. "And when they do, they're going to talk about the need for water. They're going to talk

about mining regulations and making sure we stay a viable mining state."

Judging from the first two major candidate forums and other candidate appearances, Nevadans expecting to hear a detailed debate over the management of public lands or mining regulation will be disappointed.

Saturday's forum in Las Vegas dealt exclusively with health care, and the questions at last month's forum in Carson City were mostly about Iraq and health care.

"It's a canard that Democrats here care about different issues than Democrats nationally," said Las Vegas political columnist and commentator Jon Ralston. "The questions at the (Carson City) forum were mostly about Iraq because the Democrats at that forum cared most about Iraq."

Ralston said that even though the federal government owns 87 percent of the land in Nevada, "It's just not a top-of-the-mind issue to most people."

Still, because Nevada's top industries are entertainment, tourism and mining, Democrats who come here without retooling their standard economic message about jobs moving overseas are likely to find that it falls flat.

"You can't outsource making a bed," said Pilar Weiss, political director of the Culinary Workers Union Local 226, the state's most powerful labor union whose membership has more than tripled in the past 15 years.

"If you look at the Southwest and you look at what's going on in this economy, the service sector is a growing sector, and these jobs are not going to be outsourced and they are jobs that have to be good jobs where people can earn a decent middle-class living and save for retirement."

The supposed uniqueness of Nevadans' political concerns is fast being overtaken by population growth. Because of the huge influx of retirees, Latinos and workers in the construction, casino and high-tech industries, the typical Nevadan is increasingly likely to be from someplace else.

The state's population grew by two-thirds during the 1990s, and that growth has dramatically transformed the state's politics.

Forty years ago, Nevada was 3-to-1 Democratic. Now it's a swing state with an almost equal number of Democrats and Republicans. And as in California, the fastest-growing segment of the electorate is voters registered as nonpartisan.

"There's a very libertarian political culture here," said Ted Jelen, a political science professor at University of Nevada Las Vegas. "People are obsessed with the amount of taxes they pay, even though it's very low compared to the rest of the country."

Nevada's presidential caucuses have historically been insular affairs, with only the most die-hard party activists interested in spending a Saturday morning at a political meeting.

Only 9,000 of the state's nearly 500,000 Democrats showed up for the 2004 caucuses that were held in March after it was clear John Kerry had the nomination locked up.

Although attendance at next year's caucuses undoubtedly will be higher, some analysts question whether participants will look much different than their counterparts in Iowa, who are predominantly white liberals and labor union members.

"I think culinary union members are going to make up a huge percentage of the caucusgoers," Ralston said.

Erik Herzik, a political science professor at the University of Nevada Reno, said, "If the Democrats expect a new type of candidate to emerge out of Nevada, I think that's wishful thinking. The activist Democrat in Nevada is probably not that different than the activist Democrat in Iowa or New Hampshire."

For now, the preferences of Nevada Democrats closely mirror those of Democrats nationally, according to a poll conducted this month by the Reno Gazette-Journal and Reno television station KRNV.

The statewide poll showed Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York leading the pack with 32 percent, followed by Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois with 20 percent, former Vice President Al Gore, who has said he has no plans to run, and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina tied at 11 percent, and no other candidate with more than 2 percent.

One second-tier candidate who plainly hopes Herzik's analysis is wrong is New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who is counting on Nevada to catapult him into the front ranks of contention. He was the first candidate to open a campaign headquarters in the state.

"He's a Western governor, so when it comes to the issues that affect Nevada like growth and water, he's actually got a lot of experience with it," said Josh McNeil, communication director for the Richardson campaign in Nevada. "We've seen that so far really resonating with people."

Or as Ralston put it, "While (Richardson) wouldn't describe it that way, it's obvious his strategy is Nevada or bust."

Richardson came close to describing it that way Friday night at a Culinary Workers Union rally.

"I'm not a rock star like the other candidates, but I want you to know that we're doing good," Richardson told the crowd of 5,000. "And we're going to win. And I'd like the first victory to be in Nevada."

All of this presidential candidate activity is not lost on Nevada Republicans, who originally planned to hold their caucuses Feb. 7. Now they also are looking at Jan. 19, even if it means getting their wrists slapped by the Republican National Committee.

Members of the Nevada Republican Party's executive board and the leaders of county committees tentatively agreed Friday during a conference call to move their caucuses up.

"We're solidly in favor of moving the date," acting state Chairman Paul Willis told The Associated Press.

Under Republican National Committee rules, any state other than Iowa and New Hampshire choosing delegates before Feb. 5 will be penalized by losing half of their delegates.

"It definitely will happen, but it's a sacrifice we have to make," Willis said.

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