

Clinton scores big win, but Obama nears finish line

Hillary Clinton scored an emphatic victory in the Puerto Rico primary, but even in defeat front runner rival Barack Obama edged closer to clinching the Democratic nomination for the US presidential race.

A 68 percent to 32 percent victory Sunday in the Caribbean island US territory gave her over two thirds of the 55 delegates at stake, but at least 15 won by Obama under the Democratic proportional system brought him just 49 short of the magic number of 2118.

In a victory speech in San Juan, Clinton told cheering supporters she would have more combined votes than her rival when the primaries end Tuesday night, claimed victories in key swing states and said that no contender will command enough delegates to claim the nomination.

'In the final assessment I ask you to consider these questions. Which candidate best represents the will of the people who voted in this historic election?' she said in an appeal to some 200 uncommitted super delegates who hold the balance of power in the fight for the nomination.

'Which candidate is best able to lead us to victory in November and which candidate is best able to lead our nation as our president in the face of unprecedented challenges at home and abroad?'

Clinton's victory in Puerto Rico was at best a symbolic victory as with only 31 delegates left to be picked up Tuesday's contests in South Dakota and Montana she just can't overtake her opponent despite a net gain of 24 delegates by a party panel's decision Saturday on Michigan and Florida.

Obama too may fall short of the magic number as Democratic panel's decision to seat the rule defying states' delegates with half a vote each has raised the winning number from 2026 to 2118. But he could still lock up the race with a possible rush of super delegates after June 3 when the primaries end.

A confident Obama called Clinton to congratulate her for winning the Puerto Rico primary, but his comments to his supporters in Mitchell, South Dakota indicated that he was already looking past the primaries to the November contest against likely Republican candidate John McCain.

Calling her an 'outstanding public servant' who had 'worked tirelessly' and would be a great asset to the Democratic Party in the general election, he said the differences between himself and Clinton pale in comparison to those between the Democrats and the Republicans.

'I know there are a lot of concerns about whether the party will come together after this long contest,' said the man who would be America's first black president.

But he told the crowd holding 'Change We Can Believe In' signs, 'She is going to be a great asset when we go into November to make sure that we can defeat the Republicans, I can promise you.'

Obama then quickly launched an attack on President George Bush and John McCain, saying the Republican nominee, 'is running to continue George Bush's policies.'

With the race all but over, observers said Clinton faces three possible options: dropping out of the

race and endorsing Obama, suspending her candidacy to be available in the outside chance he stumbles or carrying her fight to the August party convention which officially picks the nominee.

What option she chooses is anybody's guess as Clinton has played her cards close to the chest. But Harold Ickes, a Clinton adviser who is a member of the party's rules panel, has said Clinton was reserving the right to contest the party rules committee' decision on Florida and Michigan, considered a major blow to her last slender hopes of catching up with Obama.

Others suggested she seemed to have come to terms over the last week with the near certainty that she would not win the nomination and would call it quits, but the question remains to what extent the bitterness between the two candidates would affect Democrats' prospects in November.

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