

PEGGY DREXLER: Clinton's fight gives Democrats better chance to survive GOP attacks

05/15/08 09:31:34

The Democratic Party is starting to wonder if Hillary Clinton is really "in it to win it" or just doin' it to ruin it.

Players and pundits are opining about such motivations as:

-Is she angling for a spot on the ticket in hopes of engineering a palace coup four years from now?

-Does she want Sen. Barack Obama to refill the Clinton retirement account, which has been depleted by \$12 million in loans to her campaign?

-Do the Clintons know something they plan to spring when it's too late for Obama to bounce back? Or is this simply health-care redux - a woman who is simply unable to admit defeat.

These are all possibilities. And they are all beside the point. The question of should she or shouldn't she comes down to a matter of rules and reality.

The rules start with the disenfranchised voters of Florida and Michigan. The governors of both states are calling on anyone who will listen that their delegates should be seated because this is a democracy, and in a democracy all votes must count.

Sure they should count, but democracy is also about rules. Individual voters must follow them - about registrations, about districts, about citizenship. And so should Florida and Michigan. As Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean points out, both Florida and Michigan voted for the system they later decided to ignore.

The reality is that cash-strapped states aren't going to pay for new elections. So any solution, if one can be found, is going to involve divvying up the delegates.

If they did that as the committed now stand, Obama is still ahead, meaning Clinton still needs to sweep the rest of the primaries. Barring a major Obama pratfall, that isn't going to happen.

That takes us back to the rules. The main reason Clinton should continue her campaign is because she can. Ralph Nader probably cost Al Gore the election, but that only happened because the aging consumer advocate persuaded enough people to vote for him. Bob Barr, the former Republican congressman from Georgia running as a Libertarian this time, may take votes from John McCain - but again, only if people decide to vote for him.

Have a problem with that? Change the system. Until then, anyone with enough energy, talent, optimism and money should be allowed to do all that the system allows.

Back to reality: Clinton staying in the race will likely not lead to a debacle in Denver. This race has drawn in young voters and new voters. Why not keep such excitement going?

People talk about the prospect of a divided convention as a terminal event - the end of political life as we know it. It might be messy. It might be rough. But it will be great politics. It will breathe life into a process that has become televised wallpaper.

It is also not the worst thing that could happen to Obama. For an untested candidate, a hotly contested primary election is better than a coronation. If you saunter to the nomination in shiny loafers and a hand in one pocket, doubts about readiness and toughness will persist.

If you come out of the pit victorious after going a year against two pit bulls like the Clintons, it says something. Being a little chewed up in the process is good. The entire campaign - like the candidate himself - will be better able to stand up to the Republican attack machine.

Democracy says that it isn't over until it's over. And it's not over until somebody hits 2,025 or the superdelegates make their choice at the convention. Until then, let's let democracy do what it does best - open the contest to all comers and let them fight it out until somebody comes out on top.

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