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Print Page

April 16, 2016 5:50PM

When it comes to primaries, New York finds itself in rare spotlight

If New York has felt more like Iowa in the last few weeks, it's not your imagination.

Presidential primary season is in full bloom nationwide, and New York's 291 Democratic delegates are the most that are up for grabs of any contest in April and the second-most in the country.

That's why Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have been canvassing the Empire State, and the Hudson Valley, trying to woo voters ahead of Tuesday's primary.

Political scientist Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz, said he couldn't remember the last time New York's primary was so important in determining the presidential nominee.

"It's very unusual for New York to be consequential in this process," he said.

Clinton, the front-runner, was U.S. Senator in New York for eight years from 2001 to 2009 and still has a home in Westchester County. She's been touting those facts while barnstorming the state, trying to maintain her lead and head off any doubts about her strength in a state she still calls home.

Benjamin thinks Clinton has the most to lose, even though he thinks she'll fare reasonably well in the primary. If Sanders wins New York, Clinton's support among "superdelegates" could melt away at the Democratic National Convention on July 28, Benjamin said. Superdelegates are unelected and can support any candidate they want at the Democratic convention. New York has 44 superdelegates.

"This is do or die for her (Hillary), this is the place she has to stop him," Benjamin said. "Her challenge is to demonstrate strength and show that there's no momentum to abandon her."

In New York, delegates are partially awarded by Congressional district, so regional strength could pay dividends in the byzantine process.

When Democrats in our region go to the voting booth, they'll see the names of potential delegates representing Clinton and Sanders. A vote for either candidate will help determine how many at-large delegates will be awarded to them for the national convention.

But they will also see the names of 10 potential delegates in the 18th Congressional District, which includes Orange County, and the 19th, which includes Sullivan and Ulster. Each delegate is aligned with a presidential candidate. Voters will be able to vote for any five in the 19th and any six in the 18th District.

Dan Torres, a New Paltz town councilman who's running to be a pledged delegate for Clinton's campaign, said he's a fan of both Clinton and Sanders. But he sees Clinton as the most qualified, calling her a "trailblazer" dedicated to social progress.

Torres, and numerous polls, suggest New York will ultimately support Clinton, but the race here in the Hudson Valley will be competitive. In 2014, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a centrist Democrat, lost Ulster and Sullivan counties by ratios of more than 2-to-1 and nearly lost Orange in a primary bout with Zephyr Teachout, a more liberal Democrat who is now running for Congress.

"I think the 2014 governor's race revealed that our region produces a certain kind of Democrat," Torres said. "I have affectionately called us 'farmers market Democrats.' We tend to gravitate towards activist and populist messages."

Despite Sanders' recent string of primary wins, the delegate math isn't in his favor. And neither is recent polling, which shows Clinton leading Sanders by about 10 points in New York. Though voters younger than 44 like Sanders more, those 65-and-older overwhelmingly support Clinton.

Still, Ulster County could end up being a Sanders hot spot. Kelleigh McKenzie, a Sanders organizer who's also running to be a delegate for him at the convention, said seven pro-Sanders grassroots groups have sprouted up in Ulster and Dutchess counties since July.

"Grassroots volunteers are now plugging into the official campaign, knocking on doors in neighborhoods across the district, and helping to organize larger events," McKenzie said.

City of Newburgh Democratic Chairman Jonathan Jacobson, who's looking to become a delegate for Clinton, said he thinks she's the most prepared to walk into the White House and handle issues like a Supreme Court nomination, foreign policy issues and gun policy. He said it's more important to elect someone who can handle being president than to send a message.

"This country needs somebody to be president on day one," Jacobson said.

Jacobson acknowledged that here in New York and especially in the Hudson Valley, Clinton's going to see a real challenge from Sanders.

"For the first time, New York is going to count," Jacobson said. "I think it'll be reasonably close, but I think she'll win."

Orange County Democratic Committee Chairman Brett Broge said Sanders could do well with the region's liberal left and white working-class voters - demographics he's had success courting before. But he thinks Clinton will be more successful in more urban areas like New York City, Newburgh and Middletown.

Borge thinks two factors could suppress Sanders' advantage with white, working-class voters in our region: Clinton's familiarity with them from her years as a U.S. senator and New York's closed primary system, which only lets registered party members vote.

But Benjamin thinks that if Sanders does somehow defy the odds and become the Democratic nominee, the country isn't in a place - as angry as voters are - to put a Democratic socialist in the Oval Office.

"We're in the middle of the storm, but not a 100-year storm," Benjamin said.

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Tyler Williams, from Highland, shows off his Bernie buttons at Marist College for the Bernie Sanders Rally in Poughkeepsie on Tuesday. KELLY MARSH/For the Times Herald-Record