With All Eyes On New York, Sanders' North Country Supporters Rally

By ANNIE RUSSELL (PEOPLE/ANNIE-RUSSELL)  •  APR 18, 2016


MARY ALTAFFER / AP
New York's primary Tuesday could be a make or break state for Sen. Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign. The website FiveThirtyEight (http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/election-2016/primary-forecast/new-york-democratic/) puts Hillary Clinton's chances of winning New York at 98 percent, but in rural upstate New York districts, many voters are "feeling the Bern."
At Trinity Park in Plattsburgh, New York this past Saturday, a large crowd gathered for a Bernie Sanders rally. Supporters chanted, "Bernie Sanders has our back, we don't need no Super PAC!"

Wendy Bridges was among them. She says the event felt more like a celebration than a political rally.

"Bernie people are really different people. They're very friendly, very nice individuals," Bridges said. "When you get them all together there's just a very spiritual feeling."

Organizers for Sanders were hoping for a large turnout. Hundreds marched through the streets of Plattsburgh, the city where just a day earlier Republican candidate Donald Trump brought out hundreds of his supporters.

Trump spoke at an indoor soccer field Friday afternoon, while a small group protested outside.

Marti Martin, a volunteer with Bernie's campaign in upstate New York, said Sanders' volunteers encouraged supporters to come out for the Saturday rally rather than protest Trump.

"We just decided up front that we were going to focus on the positive," Martin said.

Martin is one of several Sanders organizers working in Plattsburgh.

At the Koffee Kat Espresso Bar last week, campaign organizers did media interviews and met with volunteers in the back room of the cafe.

The coffee shop has become a de-facto campaign office, where supporters can pick up lawn signs and plan rallies like the one held on Saturday.

Adam Guillette, a full-time volunteer with the Sanders campaign, says the canvassing efforts have been successful in the area.

"Just this past weekend we covered over 1,600 doors, just on Saturday and Sunday in Plattsburgh," Guillette says. "I think Saturday we had 92 volunteers show up."

New York is a closed primary, so only registered Democrats have the opportunity to vote in that party's primary.

Guillette himself was a registered independent, but switched his party last September so he could vote for Sanders.

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Since the deadline to register or change party affiliation was Oct. 9, 2015, Guillette says he worries that some New York independents missed the boat.

"All the people in New York that didn't know about Bernie, they didn't even know about that deadline. They didn't know who Bernie was," said Guillette. "They got locked out, they didn't even have a chance to hear him in a debate yet."

The first Democratic debate took place Oct. 13, 2015, four days after the deadline to register.

Still, Sanders may still do very well in upstate New York.

Gerald Benjamin, a political science professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, has been following the race.

He says if voting patterns follow the most recent gubernatorial race in New York, Sanders stands to pick up some delegates upstate.

"Upstate there was enormous enthusiasm for a candidate to the left of Gov. Cuomo — that was Zephyr Teachout — and if that persists, then Sanders might do well because of the ideological predisposition of activist voters," said Benjamin.

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But Hillary Clinton still leads by a comfortable margin in the delegate-rich downstate area, which includes New York City and its suburbs.

Sanders volunteer Adam Guillette says if Sanders doesn't end up as the Democratic nominee, some of the supporters Guillette's heard from will be undecided.

"I can't talk for every Bernie support that is going to write him in or vote Green Party. I mean, I'm sure there's just as many if not more who might vote for Hillary," said Guillette. "I feel like a lot of people are still undecided of what to do, and might go off of how the DNC treats Bernie and his supporters the rest of the
With All Eyes On New York, Sanders’ North Country Supporters Rally: "...way."

North Country Public Radio’s Zach Hirsch contributed reporting for the story.

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