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POLITICS | ELECTION 2016

Hillary Clinton Looks to Avoid Convention Fight as Bernie Sanders Presses Agenda

Senator's campaign is demanding that Democratic platform reflect his message



Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders waving to the crowd at the conclusion of his speech at a campaign stop in Rapid City, S.D. on Thursday. *PHOTO: KRISTINA BARKER/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **LAURA MECKLER**

May 13, 2016 6:32 p.m. ET

Looking to avoid a messy Democratic convention this summer, people close to likely nominee Hillary Clinton predict she will give Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders much of what he wants on the party's platform. But at least for now, the Sanders forces are itching for a fight.

Already, Mr. Sanders has accused the chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee of stacking convention committees in favor of the former secretary of state and has threatened a floor fight if he isn't treated fairly.

“This convention should be a real debating place about what the party is and what it should stand for,” said Larry Cohen, a Sanders adviser and retired labor leader.

Mrs. Clinton says Mr. Sanders has “every right” to continue competing until the last votes are cast, but she has made clear that she expects unity to follow, as it did following her 2008 defeat. “We’re going to unify the party, and we’re going to have a great convention,” she said last week on MSNBC.

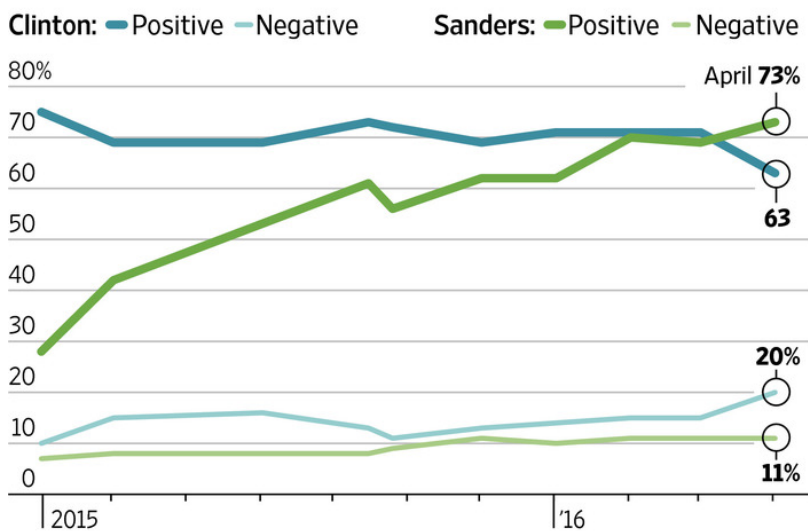
The different messages reflect the candidates’ differing situations. Mrs. Clinton is gearing up for the fall contest; Mr. Sanders is still hoping to wrest the prize from her and, barring that, push the Democratic Party closer to his populist agenda.

It is possible that the two sides will reach accommodation after the voting ends in mid-June and before the convention begins in late July. At the moment, though, they appear far from an agreement over the tone and substance of the four-day gathering, which the Clinton campaign views as one of its best opportunities to communicate her vision to voters.

Primary Season’s Toll

Hillary Clinton’s image among Democrats is growing more negative as her battle with Sen. Bernie Sanders for the presidential nomination wears on. By contrast Democrats are viewing Mr. Sanders more favorably.

Ratings of candidates among registered Democratic voters



Source: WSJ/NBC News telephone polls, most recent of 1,000 registered voters conducted April 10-14; margin of error for the full sample: +/-3.1 percentage points
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Her campaign is in the early stages of planning the program, including who will deliver major speeches and what the overall themes should be. Meantime, people close to the campaign said they were waiting for a signal from Mr. Sanders as to what he wants and how the pair can come together.

Mr. Sanders is promising a “contested convention” and says the nominee won’t be chosen until delegates arrive in Philadelphia. His campaign also is demanding that the Democratic platform reflect his message and a handful of major changes to how the

party picks future nominees.

With eight states plus the District of Columbia yet to vote, it is almost impossible for Mr. Sanders to overtake Mrs. Clinton's lead among pledged delegates, the type chosen by voters. He also trails badly among superdelegates, party leaders who can vote for whomever they like.

Short of an outright win, aides say Mr. Sanders will insist that a range of his positions be reflected in the platform, including a single-payer, government-run health program; a \$15 federal minimum wage; expanded Social Security benefits; opposition to free-trade agreements; and free tuition at public colleges. In each case, Mrs. Clinton has alternative views that don't go as far as his do.

"It's not about unifying the party," said Warren Gunnels, Mr. Sanders's policy chief, who will likely represent the campaign on the platform-drafting committee. "It's about making sure we have big, bold change that will fundamentally transform the U.S. economy....There are still fundamental disagreements."

Mrs. Clinton has argued that most of the Sanders plans are unrealistic and that some of them are unworkable. But several Clinton allies said the campaign is likely to let him insert at least some of what he wants in the party platform. That is partly because they don't see the two as being very far apart, and partly because they say the platform language doesn't really matter anyway.

Hilary Rosen, a Democratic consultant who is close to the Clinton campaign, predicted that the campaign would have an "open mind" on these issues and "a commitment to progressive values."

"We've heard time and again from Hillary Clinton in the last couple of weeks that she respects Sen. Sanders and she respects his supporters. As far as the Clinton team is concerned, most everything is on the table in terms of how do we most effectively come out of that convention united," she said.

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, another Clinton ally, predicted much more comity than confrontation. Disputes, he said, can be handled in a "healthy way."

"If both sides go at these disagreements with the right spirit, you can reach some clearly good agreements," he said.

Clinton spokesman Brian Fallon also suggested that her campaign isn't looking for a fight. "Hillary Clinton is proud of the progressive ideas she put forward in this campaign, and we expect the platform will reflect those ideas," he said. "She has also made clear that there is much more that unites Democrats than divides us."

The Sanders campaign is also pushing for changes affecting the rules of the party and how future presidential nominations are decided. Priorities include reducing the power of superdelegates, pressuring states to allow independents to vote in party primaries and swearing off super-PAC contributions in primary races, said Mr. Cohen, the Sanders adviser, who is also a member of the Democratic National Committee. He said these points should be debated by the convention's rules committee.

It is unclear whether the committee will have the power to deal with these issues. A DNC spokesman said party rules give that panel jurisdiction over rules related to the 2016 convention, not delegate selection or other matters. Other experts on party rules say that these issues could be debated in Philadelphia with recommendations for future action.

Former Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts, a Clinton ally who will serve as co-chairman of the rules committee, said he is sympathetic to some of the Sanders agenda, including reducing the power of superdelegates as a move to make the process more democratic.

As for issues, Mr. Frank doesn't anticipate big fights.

"There aren't major issue divisions between [Mr. Sanders] and Hillary Clinton," he said.

He said Mr. Sanders's call for a \$15 minimum wage is "very likely" to be included in a platform, even though Mrs. Clinton backs \$12. And Mrs. Clinton herself took a step toward Mr. Sanders on health care this week when she floated the idea of expanding eligibility for Medicare to people as young as 50, who could buy in.

Mr. Frank said Democrats have been for "Medicare for all" before. "I don't think there's any problem with that being an ultimate goal."

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