

Extra Feature Story

Democratic Super Delegates Face Pressure Over Presidential Pick

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Nearly 800 Democratic super delegates are playing an unexpectedly important role in this year's Democratic primary between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

The youngest super delegate is Jason Rae, a 21-year-old from Wisconsin. This year, his ability to publicly endorse a candidate has made his cell phone number a popular one with Democratic party leaders from President Bill Clinton and beyond.

On his way to the grocery store, Rae said he stopped to chat with Massachusetts senator and Obama supporter John Kerry. Sitting in the car, waiting for an oil change, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright rang, and Rae went to breakfast with Chelsea Clinton when she visited Wisconsin to support her mother's campaign.

"To be 21 years old and to receive calls from President Clinton, Madeline Albright and John Kerry, for me those calls were all an important learning process. These calls gave me a new perspective into how the campaign was going," he said.

Who are the super delegates?

Super delegates are often influential party leaders, including former presidents, governors, members of Congress, and party activists elected by state representatives.

In 1982, Democratic Party leaders created the super delegate process in an effort to re-establish some measure of electoral control to party insiders after a decade of wide-open, populist primary results.

Super delegates are permitted to vote for whomever they choose, allowing the party to counterbalance traditional "pledged" delegates who are typically awarded in state primaries and caucuses.

Under Democratic National Committee (DNC) rules, pledged delegates are distributed proportionally after a state's primary or caucus votes are tallied, meaning that a candidate who receives 30 percent of the vote will receive approximately 30 percent of the available delegates.

This year, as the tight race between Senators Obama and Clinton continues, neither candidate will likely gain the 2,025 delegates needed to secure the Democratic presidential nomination by popular vote and pledged delegates alone. As a result, the individual, unpledged support of some 800 super delegates is on track to be the deciding factor in the race.

A tough decision

Super delegates do not all agree, however, on the appropriate means of choosing which candidate to support. Some, such as Congressman Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, have suggested that super delegates have an obligation to reflect the will of the voters.

Others, such as former DNC national chairman Steve Grossman and current chair Howard Dean, believe super delegates should exercise their own judgment to determine who will best serve the needs of the party in a general election.

Jason Rae's dilemma

Jason Rae, who lost an election to represent his hometown in sixth grade, but at 17 won a statewide election against the president of a firefighter's union and a state legislator to become a super delegate, is taking his responsibility very seriously.

He believes the party will avoid a delegate deadlock and have its nominee before the national convention held in Denver this August. "I think [both candidates] know that not having a nominee by May will be detrimental to the country," he said.

Rae believes that recent criticism of super delegates — as being removed from the electoral process and the will of the people — is unfounded. He notes that his daily routine consists primarily of voter outreach: working with the DNC Youth Council, volunteering for local campaigns, and even answering e-mails from those who are interested in the party, the election season or the respective candidates.

"There's some people out there who've said DNC members are these party insiders who spend all their time in back rooms making deals doing this or that, and to me, that's not the case," he said. "I'm a student, I'm an activist in the party and on top of that I hold this position. I think they all go hand-in-hand."

Decision made

After weighing the results of the Wisconsin primary, in which young voters supported Obama in record numbers, and forming his own opinion on the candidates and issues, Rae decided to support Obama.

"The reason I ran for the DNC in the first place was to be a voice for this generation. I saw very clearly that the generation was speaking for Senator Obama," he said, adding, "But it should come down to super delegates determining individually who they think would be best for the country and for the party. I was leaning towards Senator Obama and those [Wisconsin poll] results reinforced my opinion."

-- Compiled by Joe Horton for NewsHour Extra

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