



Economist.com

WORLD  
UNITED STATES

## The primaries

### Never say die

Mar 6th 2008 | AUSTIN, TEXAS AND COLUMBUS, OHIO  
From The Economist print edition

#### The voters in Texas and Ohio have upended the Democratic race yet again

Getty Images



#### Get article background

THERE were two big winners in this week's Democratic primaries: Hillary Clinton, who returned from the political graveyard, and John McCain, who, having secured the Republican nomination, can now enjoy the spectacle of the two Democratic candidates at each other's throats for at least another six weeks.

On the morning of March 4th Mrs Clinton faced the end of her presidential dreams. No less a person than her husband had stated that she might have to think of pulling out of the race if she lost in Texas and Ohio. Two of the party's most influential grandees, Ed Rendell, the governor of Pennsylvania, and Bill Richardson, the governor of New Mexico, said much the same thing. Her campaign has had financial problems, is riven by infighting and was overclouded by gloom.

Mrs Clinton's three victories on Tuesday night—in Rhode Island, Ohio and Texas—changed all this. They ended Barack Obama's winning streak of 11 consecutive primaries and caucuses (12 if you count Vermont, which he won early on Tuesday evening). They applied a jolt of energy to the Clinton machine. And they forced a Democratic establishment, which was beginning to view Mr Obama as inevitable, to give Mrs Clinton another chance.

Mrs Clinton pulled off this resurrection by reassembling her core constituency of working-class whites, women, older voters and Latinos. Mr Obama had been steadily eating into these groups during his long winning spell. There was also lots of speculation that the Texas Latinos—who are younger—might behave differently from their Clintonian Californian cousins.

But the exit polls show that Mrs Clinton reformed her bond with these groups. She won women in both Ohio and Texas by 16 and nine points respectively. She won white men in Ohio by 19 points. She won Texas Latinos, who turned out in record numbers, by two to one. Her biggest margins came from people who have not been to university (ie working-class voters). She won these voters by 17 points in Texas and an astonishing 32 points in Ohio.

Mrs Clinton was clearly helped by her decision to mount a bare-knuckle assault on Mr Obama in the days before the election. She hammered him as not being prepared to be commander-in-chief (an advertisement showed a phone ringing in the White House at 3am and a poised Mrs Clinton answering it). She skewered him for talking out of both sides of his mouth on NAFTA (an Obama adviser seemingly assured the Canadians that he was not really threatening to tear up the trade deal).

She was also helped by a fit of guilt in the press corps. The Clinton campaign has been complaining for weeks that the press have treated Mr Obama with kid gloves. But what arguably gave the journalists the kick they needed was a skit on "Saturday Night Live" which skewered journalists for pandering to Mr Obama. The press pack turned on Mr Obama dramatically in the couple of days before the election—peppering him with questions about his position on NAFTA and his ties with Tony Rezko, a Chicago businessman (see [article](#)). Mr Obama responded with less than his normal aplomb, to put it mildly.

These twin assaults clearly had an impact. Mrs Clinton won decisively among people who made up their minds in the last moment (a fifth of Texans and of Ohioans). But Mrs Clinton's success in throwing the kitchen sink at Obama was abetted by worries about the kitchen table. The rapidly deteriorating economy is spreading gloom and anxiety across the land, playing to Mrs Clinton's strengths as a tried-and-tested manager and taking the wind out of Mr Obama's vague talk of "change" and "hope". Half the voters in Texas and three-fifths in Ohio regarded the economy as the most important issue.

Mrs Clinton's assaults on Mr Obama were not very pretty—particularly her Nixonian assurance that her rival is not a Muslim "as far as I know". But Mrs Clinton was also helped by her extraordinary indomitability in the face of adversity. The former first lady managed to march on despite chaos in her campaign and growing calls for her to withdraw from the race. The best line in her victory speech, in Columbus, Ohio, came when she used this indomitability to strike a chord with hard-pressed Americans: "For everyone here in Ohio and across America who's ever been counted out but refused to be knocked out, and for everyone who has stumbled but stood right back up, and for everyone who works hard and never gives up, this one's for you."

The fighter still faces daunting odds. Mr Obama began March 4th with a lead of around 160 delegates. For all the headlines about her victories in Ohio and Texas, the Democratic Party's system of allocating votes proportionally means that she has done almost nothing to close her delegate gap. Mrs Clinton gained only about a net nine delegates from her ten-point win in Ohio. And thanks to Texas's bizarre "two-step" voting system, which allows primary voters to vote again in a Democratic caucus, she ended up securing only one or two more delegates than he did. Mr Obama won in the caucus, in which only about 100,000 people voted, versus 2.8m in the primary.

By some calculations she still needs to win more than 60% of the popular vote in the remaining contests to have a chance of catching up with Mr Obama—a near impossibility (she only won 54% in Ohio). Mr Obama is likely to resume his winning streak in the forthcoming contests in Wyoming on March 8th and is certain to do so in Mississippi on March 11th.

Texas and Ohio will not change the fact that Mrs Clinton has messed up what should have been an easy march to the nomination, allowing herself to be outcampaigned, outsmarted and outspent by a newcomer. In every race she enters she sees huge leads in the opinion polls shrink dramatically as Mr Obama works his rhetorical and organisational magic.

Mr Obama also has plenty of kitchen sinks of his own to throw at his rival. Is Mrs Clinton really the right person to be raising questions about financial shenanigans? Two of Mrs Clinton's closest associates from her years in Arkansas, Jim McDougal, her property partner, and Webb Hubbell, her law-firm partner, were later convicted of felonies.

And besides, exactly what experience does she actually have of answering telephones at three in the morning? Mrs Clinton did not even have security clearance in the White House, and her most important vote in recent years, to authorise the Iraq war, is one that she admits she regrets. When a journalist from *Slate* magazine asked her closest advisers, on a conference call, to name an international incident in which their candidate has been tested, he was met with a long, embarrassed silence.

But the dynamic in the race has clearly changed yet again. Mrs Clinton can use the peculiar result in Texas—the fact that the caucuses produced such a different vote from the broader primary—to question the significance of Mr Obama's performance in other caucuses, all of which he has won. She can also keep pointing out, as she did this week, that no recent candidate has won the White House without winning Ohio, the truest bellwether state. If Mrs Clinton cannot catch up with Mr Obama in pledged delegates, Mr Obama also has no chance of reaching the 2,025 delegates that would secure him the nomination. Both

must rely on superdelegates.

Mrs Clinton is also in pole position to win the next big primary, in Pennsylvania on April 22nd. Pennsylvania is in many ways more like Ohio than Ohio itself, a rust-belt state rich in working-class voters and senior citizens, and a must-win state for the Democrats in the general election. Mrs Clinton also has the support of the state's governor, Mr Rendell, who is determined to perform as well for her as Ted Strickland, the governor of Ohio, did for her this week.

The result will be a punch-up not just in Pennsylvania but in the Democratic Party as a whole as Democrats squabble over everything from party rules (should the delegates from Florida and Michigan be seated or not?) to the relative importance of small and large states. There is an ancient Greek myth, retold in Aeschylus's play "Seven against Thebes", about two sons of Oedipus who fought so bitterly over who should inherit their father's kingdom that they ended up slaughtering each other. This could be the Democrats' Theban moment.

Copyright © 2008 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.