

It's neck and neck

Message of hope and unity resonates in nation's first primary

Brian Wright O'Connor

CONCORD, N.H. — The crowd that showed up early on the morning after the Iowa caucuses to hear Barack Obama was drawn only partly by the Illinois senator's message of hope and reconciliation.

"Sure, I like his themes. We need unity. We need change," said a New Hampshire voter stamping his feet in the bitter frost outside Concord High School. "But most of all, we need victory."

The skinny kid from Chicago who electrified the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, the first-term U.S. senator who defied the odds in taking on the Clinton campaign machine, the mixed-race hopeful who broke the color line in national politics, appeared poised to win New Hampshire and its prize of momentum and money — a critical test in the road to the nomination and, ultimately, the White House.

Obama's potent mix of inspiring rhetoric and imminent power crackled like an electric charge as the Democratic frontrunner, riding the wave of his historic victory in the Iowa contest, strode into the packed gymnasium beneath a double bank of TV cameras.

His voice slightly hoarse, the 46-year-old candidate launched an immediate appeal to wring every vote from the Granite State to continue what was once dismissed as a long-shot march to the Democratic nomination for president.

"How many of you are still undecided?" he asked.

Hands went up from about a third of the audience.

"See," he said to the young organizers standing next to him on stage. "We have a lot of work to do."

Turning back to the largely white faces sitting elbow to elbow in the bleachers and surrounding the stage set up on the foul line, Obama invoked a biblical image to convert the faithless to his cause.

"My job is to be so persuasive in the next 20 minutes that a shaft of sunlight will come through the roof and you will then decide to vote for Obama," he said.

A huge poster hanging beneath championship sports banners on the wall behind him proclaimed, "Change We Can Believe In," a not-so-subtle rebuke of chief rival Hillary Rodham Clinton's "The Change We Need" slogan. Building on that theme, the former Chicago community organizer hammered home the point that his insurgent candidacy represented the only real

Campaign '08

Hope, continued to page 6



Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton share a laugh prior to the start of the Democratic primary debate at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, S.C., in April 2007. Those were happier times for the two senators, who now find themselves entrenched in a battle for their party's number one spot. Obama

took an early lead with his Jan. 3 victory in the Iowa caucuses, but Clinton rebounded from her third-place finish there with a hard-fought victory in Tuesday's New Hampshire primary that has again drawn the hotly contested race even. (AP photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Clinton defies polls and predictions, earns key victory in N.H.

Banner Staff

In an unexpectedly close race, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton edged Illinois Sen. Barack Obama Tuesday night in New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation Democratic primary, giving her troubled campaign a much-needed boost after the former first lady's stunning third-place finish in the Iowa caucuses last week.

On the Republican side, Arizona Sen. John McCain climbed back into contention for his party's presidential nomination, defeating both former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and Iowa caucus winner Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor.

With 77 percent of New Hampshire's precincts reporting, Clinton had earned 83,568 votes, or 39 percent. Obama trailed with 76,953 votes, or 36 percent. Former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, fresh off a second-place finish in Iowa, lagged behind with 17 percent, or 35,761 votes.

The close race between Clinton and Obama came as a surprise to

media experts and political pundits, many of whom had predicted an Obama win by a sizeable margin.

As late as Tuesday morning, a Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby poll showed that Obama had expanded his lead over Clinton by 13 percentage points. According to the poll, Obama led Clinton in all categories of voters except women and voters over the age of 65, and was pulling away from the New York senator among base Democratic voters. The poll had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

The economy and the war in Iraq were the top issues in both party primaries, according to interviews with voters leaving their polling places after casting ballots in the most wide-open presidential race in at least a half-century.

But it became clear once the polls closed that Clinton was mounting an unexpectedly stiff challenge to Obama — with votes counted from 11 percent of the state's precincts, she was running ahead of Obama, 38 percent to 36 percent, a lead she maintained as more and more precincts reported.

Clinton's performance, based on the early returns, surprised even her own inner circle.

In the hours leading up to the closing of polls, her closest advisers had appeared to be bracing for a second defeat at the hands of Obama.

Officials said her aides were considering whether to effectively concede the next two con-

Clinton, continued to page 7

Patrick planning to create education secretary post

Ken Maguire

Gov. Deval Patrick plans to file legislation this week to create a cabinet-level education secretary, as part of an effort to make education a top issue for 2008.

The governor's bill also would grant him greater control of education boards by expanding the number of seats on the panels, allowing Pat-

rick to add more supporters to advance his agenda, according to three people familiar with the plan.

Patrick, who has advocated for lengthening the school day and providing two years of free community college education, plans to provide details of his education governance bill in a speech this week.

The Associated Press first reported the story Monday, citing sources that

spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the governor hadn't publicly released the plan.

The governor, who has publicly expressed frustration with his inability to gain more control over state boards, last year appointed a large task force called the "Readiness Project" to recommend ways to implement his agenda. The panel's recommendations are due in late winter.

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Patrick's top education adviser, Dana Mohler-Faria, would be a likely choice for secretary. Mohler-Faria,

who is president of Bridgewater State College, has volunteered over the past year helping Patrick shape his education goals, often serving as an official representative of the administration.

Mohler-Faria, who was by Patrick's side along with his cabinet secretaries at a year-end news conference, already has a temporary staff within the state Board of Higher Education. One of the sources said it's likely that the bill will formalize Mohler-Faria's role, rather than establish a new bureaucracy.

The scope of the secretary's responsibilities was not immediately known.

Currently, education leadership Patrick, continued to page 24

What's INSIDE

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT 16
BILLBOARD 17

LISTINGS

BUSINESS DIRECTORY 22
CALENDAR 24
CHURCH GUIDE 23

PERSPECTIVE

EDITORIAL 4
OPINION 5
ROVING CAMERA 5

CLASSIFIEDS

HELP WANTED 25-27
LEGALS 24
REAL ESTATE 24-25