

McCain, Obama strive to gather most post-convention momentum

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Momentum. Democrats say they have it, courtesy of a week of whooping it up at their national convention in Denver.

Republicans say it will belong to them as of Monday, when the party opens its national convention in St. Paul, Minn. In fact, they may have grabbed some of it Friday, when Republican presidential hopeful John McCain surprised many people by picking Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate.

Politicians contend that momentum is important and that enthusiasm can bring in more support for their candidates.

"There's always a contest to see who can get the bigger bounce," said Ingrid Reed, of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

But this is a different convention year: The conventions run back to back, without the normal week or so break in between.

Many major media outlets are covering the events not so much as separate conventions, but as parts one and two of a two-week political miniseries; one convention rolls immediately into another. Voters get to see different political philosophies back to back, allowing them to quickly compare the two.

It could mean momentum gained by Democrats last week may quickly be quashed by a successful Republican gathering.

Right now, the overall bounce is with Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama who, depending on the poll, took a four- to six-point lead in what was a relatively dead-even race with McCain. Reed contends that likely could change by the time McCain gives his acceptance speech to wrap up the Republican convention Thursday.

"I suspect that the Republicans will get some kind of bounce," she said.

State Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, D-Union, who heads New Jersey's Democratic State Committee, says that won't happen in New Jersey, courtesy of the Super Bowl champion New York Giants' game versus the Washington Redskins.

"I wouldn't want my acceptance speech up against the Giants' home opener," he said.

Reed also contends it may not be all that important as to which party goes first with its convention.

"There are so many variables," she said. "It really depends on how you capture the attention of the voter."

State Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Middlesex, Mercer, who chairs McCain's New Jersey campaign effort, agreed, saying there's little historical evidence to indicate the party that holds its convention first has the advantage.

"There's no trend," he said.

Assuming neither party has a hold on momentum by the end of next week, and that the Obama-McCain

race returns to a statistical dead heat, voters will have some decisions to make.

"I think it's all about the message, and our candidates making sure that we speak concisely and directly to the important issues that are affecting the American people," said Atlantic County Republican Committee Chairman Keith Davis.

If voters have to absorb a lot of political haranguing in the two-week convention season, they also have a week or two less to start digesting what Obama and McCain have to say. The conventions were held a week or two later than normal.

"It's a very truncated election," Davis said. "Voters may be grateful that they're late."

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