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Obama veepstakes: Sebelius?

BY DAVID GOLDSTEIN

Ever since Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius turned a red state blue six years ago, she has been a potential vice presidential pick.

She was the rare Democrat who could win Republican votes.

That's why she has been a fixture all these months in the speculation surrounding Sen. Barack Obama's choice of a running mate.

"I think she is being considered," said Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri, an Obama ally and advisor whose name also has gotten some buzz, although she discounts the possibility. "She has great executive skill, has had success in a very difficult terrain and is thought of very highly by her peers, Democrats and Republicans."

A lot of names are in the mix, including Obama's rival, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton. It's unclear whether their private meeting Thursday night settled her future role in the campaign.

In the meantime, how realistic are Sebelius' chances?

The governor said this past week that while she talks with Obama's staff and occasionally with him, "There has been no discussion with me or anyone else on my team about serving as vice president."

Paul Light, a government expert at New York University, said: "You get on a short list if you have something that you can deliver."

Based on conversations with several political strategists, analysts and others, here are some of Obama's needs and how well Sebelius might fill them:

- Who could aid Obama in a state that would help put Democrats over the top after close finishes in the past two presidential elections?

The chances of Kansas going Democratic in the fall, even with Sebelius on the ticket and her record of red state success, are slim to none. A Democrat running for president has carried the state only once since the 1940s -- Lyndon Johnson in 1964 -- and Kansas hasn't had a Democratic senator since 1939.

"You can't make an argument that Kansas gets in play," said Steve Elmendorf, who helped run Sen. John Kerry's presidential campaign four years ago and backed Clinton this year. "You can make an argument that someone who represents a red state brings that sense to the ticket."

Winning a swing state such as Missouri, where McCaskill might offer a boost, or snatching Virginia from the GOP is important, however. That makes Virginia Sen. Jim Webb -- a Republican-turned-Democrat, a decorated Vietnam veteran and a former Navy secretary -- possibly a strong contender.

Ohio, though, is at the top of the list of must-win states. Clinton trounced Obama in the primary there. That's why popular Gov. Ted Strickland, a Clinton supporter, gets a lot of attention.

But Sebelius also might help. She was born in Ohio and has a political lineage. Her father, John Gilligan, was a former Ohio governor and congressman.

- Who could bolster Obama's lack of foreign policy and national security credentials?

This will be where Sen. John McCain, the eventual Republican nominee, will attack. Sebelius, who has even less experience than Obama, offers no help.

"She's a rare political talent," said Jim Jordan, a Democratic political operative and a former director of Kerry's campaign. "But her one conspicuous liability is a lack of foreign and military policy experience."

The names being talked about to fill this gap are Democrats such as Sens. Joseph Biden of Delaware, Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and Evan Bayh of Indiana -- another Clinton ally -- and former Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, a defense expert.

- Who could help personify Obama's message of change and dialing back the partisanship?

Jim Webb is one. Former Republican Sen. Bill Cohen, who served as President Clinton's defense secretary, could be another.

But it's a pitch straight into Sebelius' wheelhouse. She has a record of drawing crossover voters and independents. She's a Washington outsider and a fresh face in national politics.

Another plus is her gender. More than half the voters are women, and her party's nominee defeated a very popular woman. Obama could feel a need to respond. But it's not a slam-dunk.

"The women who were Hillary Clinton supporters were very loyal to her," said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "It was about her and her candidacy. I don't think you can put any woman on the ticket and just get women voters."

The veepstakes is one of the capital's favorite political guessing games. There's no perfect formula. Picking a candidate to win a state hasn't worked since 1960, when President Kennedy chose Johnson and captured Texas.

Balancing geography and age also is overrated. Bill Clinton and Al Gore both were from the South and both were baby boomers. But they presented an image of youth and vibrancy.

Choosing a running mate will be Obama's most important decision as nominee. It will say a lot about how he measures his political strengths and shortcomings and how he wants the public to view an Obama presidency.

It's in "the country's interest to make sure I make this decision well," he told CNN this week.