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Sebelius as VP pick gets mixed review

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WASHINGTON | Ever since she proved a Democrat could not only win, but also hold, her red state, Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius has been a potential vice presidential pick.

She was the rare Democrat who could win Republican votes.

And it's why she has been a fixture in the speculation surrounding Sen. Barack Obama's choice for a running mate.

"I think she is being considered," said Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri, an Obama ally and adviser 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, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York.

Meantime, how realistic are Sebelius' chances?

The governor has said 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."

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 him in a state that would help put Democrats over the top after close finishes in the last 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 who backed Clinton this year. "You can make an argument that someone who represents a red state brings that sense to the ticket."

It's important to win a swing state like Missouri, where McCaskill might offer a boost, or snatch Virginia from the GOP. That makes Sen. Jim Webb, a Virginia Republican-turned-Democrat with a strong military background, 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 there and her father, John Gilligan, was an 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 presumptive GOP nominee, will attack. Sebelius, with 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 like Sens. Joe Biden of Delaware, Chris 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?

Webb is one. Former Republican Sen. Bill Cohen, who served as President Bill Clinton's secretary of defense, 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, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. “It was about her and her candidacy. I don’t think you can put any woman on the ticket and just get women voters.”

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