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USA TODAY ARTICLE
Democrats pounce on Nevada precincts
By Martha T. Moore, USA TODAY

The new soccer team in Las Vegas' Azteca league sports blue jerseys and a state assemblyman as captain. Los Democrats' goal: to spark interest in Nevada's presidential caucuses among the state's Hispanic voters.

While the team plays, volunteers register voters and hand out caucus information. In the team's debut, Los Democrats tied Las Escorpiones, 1-1.

ON POLITICS: All aboard the primary train!

The rival they'll face in November --- the republicans --- has been slower to take the field.

A year ago, Democrats moved the Nevada presidential caucuses from February to Jan. 19, trying to give a bigger voice to a Western state and to Hispanic and union voters in the 2008 nominating contest. Eight months later, Republicans followed suit, moving their caucuses to the same date.

As a result, Nevada Democrats are further along in organizing what is now an important early presidential contest, efforts that could pay off in November 2008 when Democrats are hoping to win Nevada and other Western states.

"We got a late start," says Pete Ernaut, head of the GOP effort.

Democrats will hold caucuses at more than 700 locations and hope to turn out 10%-20% of party voters, compared with Iowa's expected turnout of 18%.

Hurdles remain despite movement

"I'm a betting person, which is why I love going to Nevada. I think the odds are really good that we achieve this," says Jean Hessburg, who is heading the Nevada's Democratic caucus effort after running Iowa's Democratic caucuses in 2004.

Republicans will combine caucus and precinct meetings at about 120 sites. "We tried to keep it as simple as possible," Ernaut says.

Delay in moving up the caucus date hurt Republicans, says Eric Herzik, political scientist at the University of Nevada, Reno. "They're six months behind the Democrats in terms of figuring out how the caucus is going to work."

But Democrats have a challenge in getting their voters out, he says. In Las Vegas, where Democrats outnumber Republicans and the party is counting on union support, 47% of voters in the 2004 election cast early or absentee ballots.

Democrats are "used to convenience voting," Herzik says. "A caucus is not convenient. It's date certain, time certain and you have to go for an hour."

To make it easier on their party members, Democrats will hold "at large" precinct caucuses in hotel ballrooms on the Las Vegas Strip, so hotel and casino employees can caucus where they work, rather than where they live.

Caucuses have been shortened to 45 minutes by skipping a party platform debate. And to teach everyone what to do, the party is holding "mockcauses," mock caucuses where participants vote for pizza toppings instead of candidates.

When Mary KupferSmith, 51, a retired legal secretary, went to her first mock debate at a Reno pizza parlor this month, she knew "zippo" about caucusing. The crowd of 70 or so ran through the process with instruction from county party officials, but KupferSmith plans to practice again. "Everybody will admit that they're not sure yet about a caucus," says KupferSmith, who voted for a cheese topping. "That's why they're going."

Democratic presidential hopefuls have all made several trips to Nevada. Former North Carolina senator John Edwards has been there a dozen times.

"In Iowa they ask, 'Why have I met your candidate only four times?' In Nevada they're asking, 'Why have I already met your candidate four times?"' says Ed Espinoza, caucus director for New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who has visited the state at least eight times.

Campaigns' learning curves

Republicans have been harder to spot. Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani and Arizona Sen. John McCain have visited twice. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, who had the most support among Republicans in a Reno Gazette-Journal poll last week, didn't campaign in the state until this month.

"There was a bit of a (learning) curve" with the campaigns, says Ernaut, of the GOP campaign. "But I think we've gotten through that."

But as other states jockey for earlier primaries --- Michigan Democrats may move their primary to Jan. 15, which would push the New Hampshire primary even earlier --- Nevada risks losing its status as the second state to make a presidential choice.
And when push comes to shove, candidates have shown favor to other states.

Last week, Edwards said he was moving staff from Nevada to other early states. At candidate forums in Reno this week, sponsored by the Brookings Institution and ABC News, no Republicans showed up and only two Democrats, Richardson and Delaware Sen. Joe Biden, attended.

Both parties see earlier caucuses as a way to the bigger prize: keeping Nevada red or turning it blue in November.

"We will have an army ready, already trained, motivated, activated Jan. 19," says Hessburg, the Democratic caucus leader. "I think it's a huge boon for us."

"It's not necessarily the turnout, it's not necessarily the results," Ernaut says. "The most important prize in a caucus like this is organization."

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