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## Democratic presidential candidates pay homage to liberal bloggers

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Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton refused Saturday to forsake campaign donations from lobbyists, turning aside challenges from her two main rivals with a rare defense of the special interest industry.

"A lot of those lobbyists, whether you like it or not, represent real Americans, they actually do," Clinton said, drawing boos and hisses from liberal bloggers at the second Yearly Kos convention.

Despite their own infatuations with special interest money, former Sen. John Edwards and Sen. Barack Obama put Clinton on the spot during a debate that featured seven of the eight major Democratic presidential candidates. They fielded questions from a crowd of 1,500 bloggers, most of them liberal. The gathering marked another advancement for the rising new wing of the Democratic Party, the so-called netroots.

The candidates were put on the defensive from the start.

The first question went to New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who was asked why he once cited Justice Byron White, a conservative, as a model Supreme Court justice. "I screwed up on that," he replied.

Clinton was asked what three lessons she learned from her failed health care reform effort during the presidency of her husband, Bill Clinton. "It is not enough to have a plan. You've got to have a political strategy," the New York senator said.

"In 90 seconds, I don't have the time to tell you all the mistakes I made."

Plunging headlong into the Internet era, all seven candidates fought for the support of the powerful and polarizing liberal blogosphere by promising universal health care, aggressive government spending and dramatic change from the Bush era.

Edwards received a loud cheer when he suggested his rivals were tinkering around the edges "I just heard some discussion about negotiation, compromise" rather than overhauling government. He said the nation needs "big change, not small change."

The party's 2004 vice presidential nominee, Edwards called on the field to join him in refusing donations from Washington lobbyists. He suggested that accepting lobbyists' money would make Democrats no better than Republicans.

"We don't want to trade their insiders for ours," said the former North Carolina senator.

Clinton, who accepts such donations, did not respond to Edwards until much later in the forum when the question was put to her. Even then, she stalled by stating the obvious.

"I think it's a position that John certainly has taken," she said, drawing laughter from the crowd. It was not clear whether the audience was laughing with her or at her.

Nonetheless, the bloggers booed and hissed when Clinton insisted a moment later that nobody would believe that she could be influenced by lobbyists' money. So would she continue to accept those donations?

"Yes, I will," she said, arguing that plenty of lobbyists represent good causes. "They represent nurses, they represent social workers, they represent, yes, they represent corporations that employ a lot of people."

Obama rejected that argument, saying Clinton should know better because special interest money helped sink her health care package in 1993. The crowd cheered wildly.

Edwards asked crowd members how many of them were represented by lobbyists. A few hands went up, and his point was made.

While they don't accept money directly from federal lobbyists, Edwards and Obama are not above benefiting from the broader lobbying community. Both accept money from firms that have lobbying operations, and Obama in particular has tapped the networks of lobbyists' friends and co-workers. Obama, a former state senator from Illinois, has long accepted money from state lobbyists.

Again and again, Edwards took swipes at Clinton. On terrorism, he said: "I don't believe we're safer. I don't agree with Sen. Clinton on that." In a previous debate, Clinton had said the country had been made safer.

Clinton explained Saturday that while post-9/11 reforms have improved the nation's safety, the country is not as safe under President Bush as it should be. "I listened carefully to John. I think we have a vigorous agreement," she said, coldly.

The Kos convention is a sign of the times.

Gone are the days when candidates and political parties could talk to passive voters through mass media, largely controlling what messages were distributed, how the messages went out and who heard them. The Internet has helped create millions of media outlets and given anyone the power to express an opinion or disseminate information in a global forum, and connect with others who have similar interests.

Clinton is viewed skeptically by the the blogging community, mainly for her history of hawkish views on Iraq. Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of Daily Kos and spiritual leader of the convention, said Clinton still might be able to mitigate her problems.

"We may decide she's not our first choice, but she's not a bad choice," he said.

Appearing solo at a session of bloggers before the debate, Clinton was warmly received, especially when she jokingly blamed a microphone malfunction on the "vast right-wing conspiracy."

One thing most bloggers have in common regardless of their political leanings is an intense frustration with the political establishment. And so it was a convention dripping in irony when liberal bloggers welcomed the living symbols of the Democratic status quo seven presidential candidates.

On the Net:

Convention site: <http://www.yearlykosconvention.org>

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