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Democrats worry Hillary Clinton may be 'drag' on other party candidates

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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Looking past the U.S. presidential nomination fight, Democratic leaders quietly fret that Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton at the top of their 2008 ticket could hurt candidates at the bottom.

They say the former first lady may be too polarizing for much of the United States. They worry she could jeopardize the party's standing with independent voters and give Republicans who otherwise might stay home on Election Day a reason to vote.

In more than 40 interviews, Democratic candidates, consultants and party chairs from every region pointed to internal polls that give Clinton strikingly high unfavorable ratings in places with key congressional and state races.

"I'm not sure it would be fatal in Indiana, but she would be a drag" on many candidates, said Democratic state Representative Dave Crooks of Indiana.

Unlike Crooks, most Democratic leaders agreed to talk frankly about Clinton's political coattails only if they remained anonymous, fearing reprisals from Clinton's campaign. They all expressed admiration for Clinton, and some said they would publicly support her fierce fight for the nomination despite privately held fears.

The chairman of a Midwest state party called Clinton a nightmare for congressional and state legislative candidates.

A Democratic congressman from the West, locked in a close re-election fight, said Clinton is the Democratic candidate most likely to cost him his seat.

A strategist with close ties to leaders in the U.S. Congress said Democratic Senate candidates in competitive races would be strongly urged to distance themselves from Clinton.

"The argument with Hillary right now in some of these red states is she's so damn unpopular," said Andy Arnold, chairman of the Greenville, South Carolina, Democratic Party. "I think Hillary is someone who could drive folks on the other side out to vote who otherwise wouldn't."

"Republicans are upset with their candidates," Arnold added, "but she will make up for that by essentially scaring folks to the polls."

In national surveys, Clinton's lead over chief rival Senator Barack Obama has widened. Her advantage is much narrower where it counts most in early voting states like Iowa and New Hampshire. In matchups against potential Republican presidential candidates, Clinton leads or is tied.

The Clinton campaign points to those figures to make a case for her electability in a constant stream of e-mails, letters and phone calls to nervous Democrats across the country. A key to their strategy is to give Clinton's candidacy a sense of inevitability despite her negative ratings, which aides insist will go down.

"All the negatives on her are out," said Clinton's pollster and strategist Mark Penn. "There is a phenomena with Hillary, because she is the front-runner and because she's been battling Republicans for so long, her unfavorability (rating) looks higher than what they will eventually be after the nomination and through the general election."

What the Clinton campaign does not say is that her edge over potential Republican candidates is much smaller than it should be, given the wide lead the Democratic Party holds over the Republicans in generic polling.

The problem is her political baggage: A whopping 49 percent of the American public says they have an unfavorable view of Clinton compared to 47 percent who say they hold her in high regard, according to a Gallup Poll survey Aug. 3-5.

Her negative ratings are higher than those of her husband, former President Bill Clinton, former President George H.W. Bush and 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry at the end of their campaigns.

A candidate's unfavorability scores almost always climb during campaigns. If the pattern holds, Clinton has a historically high hurdle to overcome.

"For Hillary, who has been on the scene for so long and has had perception of her so ground in ... there's no question it will be really hard for her to change perceptions," said Democratic pollster David Eichenbaum, who represents moderate Democrats in Republican-leaning states.

Her baggage is heaviest in those states. Private polling conducted in Colorado, for example, shows that Clinton's negative rating is 16 percentage points higher than her favorability score.

Colorado is a state Democrats hope to win in the 2008 presidential race. It also has an open Senate seat, with the Republican incumbent opting not to seek another term and Democrats targeting it.

Obama has much lower unfavorability ratings than Clinton, though Democrats say he may have his own problem that of race. It is hard to measure the impact of being the first party to put a black at the top of the ticket, Democratic leaders said.

Some Democrats hold out hope that Clinton can turn things around.

In Indiana, where three freshman Democratic congressmen are fighting to retain their seats, Crooks said Clinton would be a burden in districts like his full of "gun-toting, bible-carrying, God-loving, church-attending" voters.

"She is just so polarizing," the state lawmaker said. Clinton would drag any candidate down 3 or 4 percentage points, he said.

But Nebraska party chairman Matt Connealy said he believes Democratic candidates will be able to avoid a Clinton backlash.

"I probably would have given you a different answer a month ago," he said, "and maybe will give you a different answer a month from now."

Associated Press writers Kathy Barks Hoffman in Michigan, Marc Levy in Pennsylvania, Lawrence Messina in West Virginia, Steven K. Paulson in Colorado, Kelley Shannon in Texas and Mike A. Smith in Indiana contributed to this report.

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