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Analysis: Clinton, Obama stake out 'experience' and 'change' camps of 2008 race

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Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is too experienced, Sen. Barack Obama too raw. Listening to Democrats give their Goldilocks view of the 2008 presidential campaign must make voters wonder: Will any candidate be just right for the White House?

"Senator Obama does represent change. Senator Clinton has experience. Change and experience," New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson said Sunday, making a balancing gesture with his hands. "With me, you get both."

Richardson may be a long shot for the nomination, but his crack underscored a question that dominated the latest presidential debate: A change versus experience dynamic that almost surely will determine who represents the Democratic Party next year.

Obama, a first-term senator only three years out of the Illinois Legislature, casts himself as a change agent who would fix the nation's broken political system. He hopes to make Clinton's three decades in politics a detriment.

Clinton, a former first lady who entered the Senate as her husband left the White House, says she is the lone candidate with enough experience to enact change.

With Clinton and Obama defining the terms, the remaining Democratic candidates are trying to elbow their way into the "change" and "experience" camps.

"You're not going to have time in January of '09 to get ready for this job," said Sen. Chris Dodd of Connecticut when asked whether Obama had the background to be president. Dodd was first elected to Congress in 1976.

Put him in the experience camp with Delaware's Joe Biden, elected to the Senate in 1972. Biden said Obama was a "wonderful guy," but he stood by past statements questioning Obama's readiness.

Clinton portrayed Obama as naive and challenged his willingness to meet with leaders of renegade nations such as Cuba, North Korea and Iran.

"I do not think that a president should give away the bargaining chip of a personal meeting with any leader unless you know what you are going to get out of that," the New York senator said.

Obama felt the elbows.

"To prepare for this debate I rode in the bumper cars at the state fair," he said with a laugh before turning the issue of experience against his Senate colleagues all of whom voted to give President Bush authority to go to war against Iraq, and now question Bush's policies.

"The thing that I wished had happened was that all the people on this stage had asked these questions before they authorized us getting in," Obama said.

"I make that point because earlier we were talking about the issue of experience," he added. "Nobody had more experience than Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney."

By putting his rivals in league with Bush's vice president and former defense secretary, Obama was telling voters that experience does not guarantee sound judgment.

Clinton, Obama and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina share the lead in polls of Iowa Democrats.

Edwards clearly wants to be the Goldilocks candidate, offering bold proposals on health care and poverty while pledging to clean up Washington. The 2004 vice presidential nominee has challenged Democratic candidates to stop taking money from lobbyists paid to influence Washington politics.

"And at least, until now, Senator Clinton has not done it," Edwards said, citing Clinton's refusal to take the pledge.

Clinton fired back, knowing that both Obama and Edwards accept tens of thousands of dollars from special interests including health insurance companies that lobby Washington.

"There is this artificial distinction that people are trying to make: Don't take money from lobbyists, but take money from the people who employ and hire lobbyists and give them their marching orders," she said.

The truth of this matter is that none of the three leading candidates is pure on this issue. As Obama said in an interview with The Associated Press last week, he and his rivals swim in the same "muddy waters."

Values such as change and experience come into play when candidates have little else to debate.

"It's not unusual that this campaign comes down to qualities of a candidate because, when you get down to it, their policy differences aren't all that great," said Arthur Sanders, professor and chairman of the department of politics and international relations at Drake University.

Their change and experience narratives could backfire on Obama and Clinton.

For example, the audience of highly partisan Iowa Democrats sat stoney faced with their arms crossed when Obama pledged to tackle the nation's big problems in a bipartisan way.

And the former first lady frustrates her more senior rivals, such as Dodd, who cannot understand why she is carrying the experience banner.

After all, Clinton has never run a company or a government, and her signature public policy health care reform failed in 1993.

"The question is not just what is your experience," Dodd told the AP, "but what have you succeeded in doing with your experience?"

He said voters who care about health care should ask Clinton, "Why did you not succeed?"

Experience will not change that question.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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