

BIDEN'S BAY STATE APPEAL COULD HELP OBAMA NATIONALLY

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BOSTON, AUG. 23, 2008.... Sen. Barack Obama's selection of Sen. Joseph Biden as his running-mate will likely resonate on Beacon Hill the way the presumptive Democratic nominee hopes it will across the country: pulling together constituencies who have been slow to warm to the Illinois senator.

Biden has a stable of ardent supporters in the House of Representatives here, field troops in Boston, and a group of well-connected political operatives who worked for his doomed presidential campaign last year.

The House members who backed Biden are affiliated with some of the same constituencies Obama is hoping the six-term Delawarean can help him win over this November: white, Catholic, center-leaning Democrats in suburban districts. They're precisely the Democrats and independents who voted for Sen. Hillary Clinton in the primaries and could be susceptible to Sen. John McCain in November.

"He brings a whole piece of the electorate, frankly, that has a question mark about Barack Obama," said public affairs executive Thomas P. O'Neill III, who sided with Biden early before switching to Obama after Biden dropped out in January.

"[Obama] sees the category of individuals in the electorate that he doesn't have. And that would be middle-class, ethnic, albeit Catholic, males, who Biden appeals to," said O'Neill, the state's former lieutenant governor and son of the late U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. "And he also gets a wide range of terrific understanding and experience" on foreign policy and the economy.

Some of that demographic was on display last October, when Biden appeared with a handful of local officeholders in front of the capitol to collect endorsements, even as he was registering in single digits in most polls. Lending their support: House Majority Leader John Rogers, Reps. Paul Kujawski, Joseph Driscoll, Garrett Bradley, Sen. James Timilty, former Reps. Jim Collins and Tom Vallely, and Boston City Councilor John Tobin.

"What would be attractive for Obama is all the expertise that Joe Biden would bring to the White House," said Rogers, who campaigned for Biden before siding with Obama after the older senator dropped out of the race. "Foreign policy is going to be a top priority to the American people for the next four years."

Rogers said Biden's long tenure as a senior statesman on geopolitical affairs would offset Obama's relative greenness on the issue: "What will be paramount in the minds of American people is can he pass the commander-in-chief test? In many ways, McCain would pass that test better than [Obama] does, because of the experience McCain's had. Joe Biden helps people answer that question in the affirmative."

And Biden has been close with some of Boston's civic and business heavyweights. Jack Connors, chairman of Partners HealthCare, backed Biden and has grown friendly with Obama since he came on the national scene. Larry Rasky, chairman of Rasky Baerlein Strategic Communications, was Biden's national communications director for the recent campaign, and Biden's press secretary during the 1988 presidential race, when Biden was sunk by a plagiarism scandal. Former Bank of America chair Chad Gifford was also on board.

To be sure, the Hill's most popular candidate for president was New York's Clinton, who drew vigorous backing from both Senate President Therese Murray and House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, along with dozens of other lawmakers. As Clinton's chances of becoming Obama's number-two appeared to ebb along the campaign trail, her supporters here conceded they thought the pairing unlikely.

And the Democrat-heavy body politic in Massachusetts would likely have rallied to whomever Obama selected, eager to get past the Bush Administration that has grown into a bogeyman for many of the state's ills.

After a disappointing fifth-place finish in the Iowa caucuses, Biden dropped out of the race last January, a full month before Massachusetts voted for Clinton, with Obama second. Biden drew a fractional ripple of residual support.

"He frankly never had the money nor the ability in the campaign to reach beyond the second tier and become a full-blown candidate," O'Neill said.

Consistent backers describe a small but loyal core of Bay State supporters. Outside the State House last year, Biden said he was grateful his parents moved from Boston when he was three years old, "because, looking at the talent here, I would've never made it."

Massachusetts was a frequent stop for Biden during his presidential run, with visits during the exploratory stage, followed by several fundraisers after he announced in January 2007. Biden also appeared at the 2007 St. Patrick's Day breakfast in South Boston, knocking fellow US Sen. John Kerry, by telling the audience, "John Kerry assured me, he was for this breakfast before when he was against it."