

Clinton tops Obama in final tally

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State's unallocated delegate goes to New York senator

Heather Clark | The Associated Press

2/14/2008

ALBUQUERQUE — Hillary Rodham Clinton was declared the narrow winner of New Mexico's Democratic caucus Thursday, following a troubled election and prolonged vote-count that lasted nine days after Super Tuesday.

State Democratic Party chairman Brian Colón, whose party conducted the caucus, said Clinton, a U.S. senator from New York, had won 73,105 votes, or nearly 49 percent, to 71,396, or about 48 percent, for U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois.

New Mexico was the last of the 22 states that held Democratic primaries or caucuses on Super Tuesday to declare a winner. The results were delayed because the outcome hinged on about 17,000 provisional ballots that had been cast Feb. 5, but were not immediately counted.

The former first lady's victory in the popular vote swung the final unallocated New Mexico delegate into her column, which gave Clinton 14 delegates in the state to 12 for Obama. A handful of Democratic Party volunteers applauded and cheered as the result was announced.

With New Mexico's tally included, the national delegate count stood at 1,276 for Obama and 1,220 for Clinton.

"I am so proud to have earned the support of New Mexicans from across the state," Clinton said in a written statement. "New Mexicans want real solutions to our nation's challenges. As

president, I will continue to stand up for New Mexico and will hit the ground running on day one to bring about real change."

Mara Lee, the state director of Clinton's campaign in New Mexico, said: "We're absolutely thrilled to be the choice of New Mexicans."

The caucus on Feb. 5 was a mess, with reports of overwhelmed polling places, long lines, too few ballots and voter confusion over where to cast ballots. Rio Rancho, one of the state's largest cities, had only one polling location where 1,900 people remained in line at 7 p.m. as the polls closed on election night.

Colón has apologized repeatedly for the problems, saying he miscalculated turnout.

Carlos Monje Jr., state director of the Obama campaign, was asked Thursday if he was confident the results were 100 percent accurate. He declined to answer directly, saying only: "We have confidence in the process."

Asked if the Obama campaign would pursue a recount, Monje said: "We have a lot of momentum behind our backs. We've won eight primary contests for Barack Obama. We feel we are going to look forward at the contests we have remaining."

He said there were some "troubling aspects" with how the caucus was conducted "that did not conform to the rules and procedures set by the party. Incredibly long lines and confusion at certain sites prevented many New Mexicans from casting their votes and shook their confidence in this process."

Monje said the campaign would continue to review the process "to make sure all questions are answered and make sure that the next election in New Mexico goes more smoothly and make sure all problems are fixed," he said.

The problems have prompted a statewide discussion of whether to hold another party-run caucus four years from now.

Colón, who came under fire for his handling of the troubled election, thanked the hundreds of volunteers who spent the past nine days counting ballots. He said volunteers donated 2,250 hours

to work on the caucus.

Colón said the figures were certified by a four-member canvassing board, including himself, Thursday afternoon. The final figures, he assured, "are accurate, double checked, triple checked."

Pahl Shipley, a spokesman for Gov. Bill Richardson, said the governor was pleased the counting is over. Richardson abandoned his own presidential run for the Democratic nomination Jan. 10 and has not endorsed either candidate. "He congratulates Senator Clinton on her hard fought victory, and applauds Senator Obama for his effort here in New Mexico," Shipley said.

He added, "While the governor believes that the party tried to make the best of a bad situation, the problems and delays are unacceptable and must be fixed if New Mexico is to continue with the early caucus."

According to a breakdown of results released by the party, Clinton received 67,246 votes on election day, 1,644 absentee votes and 4,215 provisional votes for a total of 73,105 votes.

The party's results show Obama received a total of 65,874 votes on election day, along with 1,587 absentee votes and 3,935 provisional votes for a total of 71,396.

Of the more than 17,000 provisional ballots, about 8,400 were counted. Some 3,500 provisionals, or about 20 percent, were cast by registered Republicans, independents and Green Party members and so were disqualified, Colón said.

Three counties — Bernalillo, San Juan and Doña Ana — reported poll workers had to hand write ballots for voters. Colón said such ballots were counted if officials could determine voter intent and the voter was a registered Democrat.

Ahead of the count, Colón and campaign representatives for Clinton and Obama agreed to count as many ballots as possible, even those that were not signed or not printed on official ballots. They signed an agreement, which changed some earlier state party guidelines, ahead of beginning the count.

A total of 149,779 eligible voters cast ballots in the caucus, about a 50 percent increase over the first presidential caucus four years ago.

Weeks before the caucus, Colón had estimated a turnout of 30,000 to 40,000 voters. His estimate was low in part because New Mexico had garnered little attention from candidates until Jan. 10, when Richardson withdrew from the presidential race.

With New Mexico suddenly in play, the caucus campaign season was condensed to a matter of days with Obama and Clinton holding rallies in the state. They also sent surrogates U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and former President Clinton to the state less than a week ahead of the caucus.