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The Other Campaign Trail

Ordinary citizens are fiercely lobbying to become convention delegates. From cookies to poetry slams, how neighbors are vying for votes.

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

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They're posting yard signs, hosting meet-ups, mass-producing campaign buttons, and courting their constituents with glossy fliers. Not the Democratic presidential candidates -- the would-be convention delegates who will nominate them.



Sonia Santana

In Austin, Texas, Mario Champion is planning a poetry slam and barbecue to raise money for Sen. Obama and burnish his own delegate profile.

Four months of primaries and caucuses have largely decided how many delegate votes each presidential candidate will have going into this summer's national convention. Now comes the race to elect the people who will cast those votes. The prize is a no-expenses-paid trip to Denver where a delegate's one obligation -- aside from standing on a chair to cheer wildly on cue -- is to vote for his or her candidate. But even that small role is drawing thousands onto the campaign trail, for the chance to be part of what could be an historic convention.

Getting to the national convention generally means winning elections in a series of county, district and state conventions that culminate next month -- and it's dog-eat-dog on the campaign trail. In Austin, Texas, Mario Champion plans a poetry slam on June 5 to raise both his delegate profile and money for his candidate, Sen. Barack Obama. In Silver Thorne, Colo., Peggy Madsen promoted her candidacy by handing out "everything cookies" -- stuffed with everything from chocolate chips to raisins and nuts -- "because Hillary Clinton does everything well," she says. And in Seattle, Jody Rodgers pumped out 5,000 Obama campaign buttons on a hand-operated press and promised to "flex" his newly buff bicep for Sen. Obama.

Neither party keeps a national count of how many people are running for delegate seats, and would-be delegates are still filing their candidacy papers in some states. But in Colorado, site of the Aug. 25-28 Democratic convention, 2,000 people ran for 48 seats up for election in May, up from "several hundred" in 2004. In Washington state, 1,700 would-be delegates ran for 51 seats at the congressional-district convention that were decided in May, up from 534 four years ago.

Excitement is high among the Republicans, too. In Florida, 836 people are running for 114 seats to the party's convention in St. Paul, Minn., in September, about twice as many as four years ago.

But it's the Democrats, caught up in the closest race in a half-century, who have transformed delegate selection from a dreary process played out in high school gyms to a high-energy campaign. "It's like running



Joann Edmond-Rodgers

Jody Rodgers (left) punching buttons.

for political office," says Mary Lee Cerillo of Fairfax, Va. She took over a bistro -- and sprang for quesadillas and bruschetta -- to promote her successful campaign.

The Democrats will send 3,253 pledged delegates to their convention, while the Republicans will elect 1,821. (An additional 795 Democrats and 559 Republicans are unpledged superdelegates who aren't part of the voter-driven selection process.)

The states and parties have different ways of filling those seats. Some, like Pennsylvania, put delegates' names on the primary ballot. Party central committees name some delegates in others. But for Washington state's Mr. Rodgers, for example, the road to Denver began at a Feb. 9 caucus at his West Seattle elementary school. There, his neighbors elected him an Obama delegate to Seattle's 34th Legislative District convention, which in turn elected him an Obama delegate to the state's 7th Congressional District convention.



A look at the process of becoming a delegate

At that convention, the Obama delegates elected seven Obama delegates to Denver -- three men and four women, to meet party rules that require each delegation to be gender balanced. Mr. Rodgers did not win a spot.

The 37-year-old new-technology tester for Adobe Systems Inc. has one final chance at the state party convention in June, when Washington's 27 at-large delegates will be elected from among a pool of applicants. "It's an all-you-can-eat buffet of democracy," he says, "but I want to see the process through."

The odds are long: The party's big-tent diversity goals reserve six of Washington's convention seats for blacks, 10 for Hispanics, and others for Asian, American-Indian, young, disabled, and gay, lesbian and transgendered Democrats. Any diversity seats that haven't been filled at the congressional-district meeting will be plugged at the state convention.

For Jonathen Kwok, on the other hand, things are looking up. This spring, the 19-year-old University of California at Los Angeles student failed in his run for a seat from his Southern California district. Now he has filed for an at-large seat, identifying himself to the party as young and Asian.

Unlike in other political campaigns, candidates for delegate have no favors to offer for votes and no policy differences. Campaigning instead is about how hard, long and creatively each has worked for the candidate. "I organized Honk for Obama at three Seattle locations," Daewoo Kim claims on his campaign Web site.

Debby Pattin's fliers show her in two buddy-buddy photos with Sen. Obama. And Richard May boasts that an Obama billboard in his front yard is the first thing people see when they cross the border from Vancouver.

Other candidates vow steadfastness. Party rules allow delegates to desert their candidate to vote their "conscience," although that isn't usually a problem: By the time the convention opens, the winning candidate typically has piled up a big lead. But this year's nominee may not have that cushion. So Daniel O'Brien, a retiree on Vashon Island, Wash., vowed that he wouldn't "be influenced by hanky panky and will hold my vote for Barack Obama."

Mr. May and Ms. Pattin, who is from Seattle, were elected delegates at their district conventions. Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Kim weren't.

A national delegate's job lasts just three days -- and winners expect the Denver trip to cost them about \$2,000 each -- so campaigning is low-budget. Ms. Pattin kept her printing costs to \$400 by using discount coupons from an office-supply store. In Indiana, Purdue University senior Jonquil Stephenson says she'll use money from a summer internship at U.S. Steel Corp. to promote her candidacy as a Clinton delegate. "Your voice is her voice," promise the yard signs she's posting.

Others campaign with emails and phone calls and on the Web. Mr. Rodgers made a video asserting that he was "against things" like apartheid all his life, and that it wasn't until Sen. Obama came along that "I have been for something." He loaded the video onto cellphones and sent friends onto the convention floor to show the video to other delegates.

Like almost everything else about the presidential campaign, delegate selection is drawing new people into the political process. Ms. Madsen, the cookie-baking Clinton supporter, says she's new to politics, but "I'm good at figuring things out." So this year, she also wrote two platform resolutions for her county convention -- on war and early-childhood education -- after launching her unsuccessful campaign for congressional-district delegate.

Would-be delegates say they have been energized by the Iraq war and the economy, but even more by the chance to be part of the political excitement. Says Mr. Champion, the Austin delegate-hopeful and poetry enthusiast: "Without a doubt, history is being made. You'd have good stories to tell your grandkids."

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Dan Picasso