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Obama's 'change' mantra energizing, unsettling for Hawaii Democratic Party

Flood of new members energizing, unsettling for Democrats in Isles

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U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois has branded his presidential campaign as about change, a powerful, if largely undefined, motivator that has brought thousands of new people to the Democratic Party of Hawai'i.

His message is an appeal to voters who are dissatisfied, even angry, with the direction of the country after eight years under President Bush. But many of the new Democrats who showed up for the first time at the Hawai'i caucuses in February and packed the party's state convention in May are talking about change that goes far beyond the White House.

In a state where Democrats have been the majority party for more than half a century, change is a potentially dangerous concept.

"There's a balance we're striking in managing this change," said Brian Schatz, the party's chairman and a former Obama volunteer. "This isn't about a wholesale replacement, either of the people or the values that have made our party strong. But it's a significant jolt of energy. And that's good."

party in transition

The party locally was already going through a generational transition before a record 37,000 turned out for the caucuses, many of whom were new to the process.

Jessica Wooley, an environmental attorney and progressive who backs Obama, said "Politicians at all levels need to listen to the people instead of special or corporate interests."

Wooley, who is running in the Democratic primary for the state House seat held by state Rep. Colleen Meyer, R-47th (La'ie, Hau'ula, Punalu'u), believes change can occur from within the Democratic majority in the state Legislature if the party's leadership responds.

"It's a grassroots effort. The Democrats need to listen to their constituents," she said. "It's consistent with a Democratic majority. But there will be change, I think the public is going to insist on it."

An Associated Press-Yahoo News poll released earlier this month asked people to describe Obama and Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican nominee. The most frequent description of Obama — at 20 percent — was as an outsider who would change things, while the second most frequent — at 13 percent — was his lack of experience. For McCain, the top description was old — at 19 percent — followed by his military service — at 9 percent.

The poll showed how branding by the campaigns — using both positive and negative themes — can be important in influencing voter opinion.