

While republicans battle, Obama never far away in Iowa
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DES MOINES, Jan 4 — While Republican presidential candidates dominate headlines in Iowa with their caucus quest, President Barack Obama's Democrats have quietly built a massive organisational structure to round up voters and win the state in November's general election.

Thousands of Democratic volunteers have mobilised across Iowa to garner support for Obama, who used the state as his launching pad for a White House victory four years ago.

The president may need that organisational advantage.

Iowa is considered a battleground state that could swing to either side, and Republican candidates have been wooing voters one-on-one here for months if not years, generating media coverage and public attention for their cause.

Obama's volunteer army has worked to offset those headlines with a quiet, on-the-ground apparatus to get out the vote. They opened eight campaign offices across the state and made more than 350,000 calls to supporters, officials said.

"Come Wednesday morning, no matter who wins the Republican race, we will have the best organisation," said Tyler Olson, 35, a state representative who is campaigning for Obama.

"And we'll continue to build on it while the Republican candidates go around the country and keep battling it out."

Part of building that structure involves luring Democrats on Tuesday to their Iowa caucuses, where voters typically express support for candidates and causes.

This year the Democratic candidate -- Obama -- is already chosen, but the campaign wants supporters to turn out anyway as a sign of organisational support.

"Obviously, the celebrity is on the Republican side, and people I've called today didn't even know the Democrats were even going to have a caucus," said Leni Stastny, 63, a retired insurance worker who was volunteering at a call centre in Cedar Rapids.

"I've got a lot of people (on the phone) that were going. And some people hung up on me. And some people didn't want anything to do with it. And some people were really mad at Obama because of ... healthcare (reform)."

Republicans will seek to exploit that anger among Obama's supporters, organisational advantages or not.

"The president's team is boasting about its organisation in Iowa but the reality is Obama's going to need it," said Kirsten Kukowski, spokeswoman for the Republican National Committee.

"Iowa today is completely different than the state that launched him to the presidency four years ago. The so-called spark is gone in Iowa for President Obama."

Obama's supporters are trying to get that spark back.

At the call centre in Cedar Rapids, volunteers ranging from their late teens to their late sixties use cell phones to dial up long lists of Democrats in their neighbourhoods. Obama campaign signs decorate the walls and windows, and a large statue of a donkey — the symbol of the Democratic party — greets visitors when they walk in.

"In essence, the Obama organisation never left," said Peggy Whitworth, 69, a neighbourhood "team leader" for the president in Iowa. "There's been this staying connected to people who were involved the first time around."

Obama campaign spokesman Ben LaBolt said the Iowa operation was representative of a nationwide grassroots organising push, which it hopes will create a strategic advantage for the president in November.

"It's indicative of the type of unrivalled organisations we've built across the country," he said.

But some supporters worry that the strong Republican presence in Iowa has drowned out Obama's message.

"I haven't seen anything from Obama this year, it's all been Republican," said Wind Goodfriend, an author and Obama supporter, while walking her dogs in the town of Storm Lake.

"I think in some ways (the campaign is) probably waiting to decide what strategy based on who the Republican nominee is, but I'm not sure if it's a good or bad thing that no attention has gone to Obama," she said.

Whitworth said Obama's presence or visibility would increase.

"Some people see the presence as lots of bumper stickers and lots of yard signs. Yard signs don't vote, you know?" she said, noting that the "thrifty" Obama campaign has been careful about how much money it wants to spend on such things.

"We will continue to be more and more visible. We've certainly been visible in the last several weeks," she said.

Obama will address a group of Iowa caucus-goers from a hotel in Washington on Tuesday, adding his voice to a scene that will otherwise be drowned out by intrigue over who wins the first Republican nominating contest in the country.

The president will travel to Iowa to campaign in person, too, though his campaign declined to say when his first trip this year would take place.

He has a reason to come often: among five nationwide state-by-state scenarios that Obama campaign manager Jim Messina has designed for victory in 2012, three of them include winning Iowa. — Reuters

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