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## Key delegates turn to Obama

Peter Nicholas, Washington  
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NEARLY three weeks remain before the next Democratic primary, but the results are rolling in from another part of the presidential contest — and they signify trouble for Hillary Clinton.

Democratic Party officials and insiders known as super-delegates are jumping to Barack Obama's camp or signalling they are headed that way, including such prominent figures as former US president Jimmy Carter. Even some super-delegates who say they are backing Senator Clinton have begun laying out scenarios under which they would abandon her for Senator Obama.

"My children and their spouses are pro-Obama. My grandchildren are also pro-Obama," Mr Carter told a Nigerian newspaper during a visit to Africa. "As a super-delegate, I would not disclose who I am rooting for, but I leave you to make that guess."

Senator Obama has trounced Senator Clinton in the financial stakes by raising \$US40 million (\$A44 million) in March, twice as much as his Democratic Party rival before their next key White House nominating clash in Pennsylvania.

The one bright spot for Senator Clinton's campaign had been the quest for super-delegates — the nearly 800 elected officials and Democratic activists not bound by election results and free to vote at the party's nominating convention for the candidate of their choice.

Because neither Senator Clinton nor Senator Obama is likely to emerge from the primary season with enough elected delegates to lock down the nomination, endorsements by super-delegates could be the key to victory.

In December, according to an Associated Press tally,



Super support: Senator Barack Obama has begun to turn the super-delegate tide against his rival.

Photo: AP

PHOTO: AFP

Senator Clinton led Senator Obama by 106 super-delegates. In February, her lead had been cut to 87. As of Thursday, it was 30. On Wednesday, the same day Mr Carter hinted strongly at his intentions, Senator Obama won support from Wyoming Governor David Freudenthal, who had been appointed the state's US attorney by Senator Clinton's husband.

Senators Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, and Robert Casey, of Pennsylvania, in recent days abandoned plans to stay neutral in the competition. Both are opting for Senator Obama. And in an embarrassment for Senator Clinton, one of the super-delegates supporting her, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, predicted in an interview with a Canadian radio station at the weekend that Senator Obama would win both the nomination and the presidency.

Senator Obama's gains among super-delegates have come even though he trails Senator Clinton in public opinion surveys in the next state to vote — Pennsylvania, on April 22 — and has faced an uproar over racially incendiary remarks made by his former pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

Senator Obama is winning over super-delegates because "his arguments are more persuasive", said Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster unaffiliated in the presidential race.

A major objective of Senator Clinton's super-delegate operation is keeping supporters from defecting. Working from her campaign headquarters, a team of aides stays in seemingly constant touch with super-delegates committed to her, sending them poll numbers and news articles meant to keep them from bolting.

"It's a slow drip, drip, drip — but it's dripping the wrong way," said Joe Trippi, who was an adviser to former Democratic candidate John Edwards.

"Psychologically, they're playing defence with super-delegates, not offence."

Some super-delegates in Senator Clinton's camp have suggested they might reconsider if she cannot meet certain goals, such as overcoming Senator Obama's lead in the popular vote total.

At this point, with 10 contests remaining, he has won about 700,000 more votes than she has. That tally excludes the votes in Florida and Michigan, which are not being recognised by the national Democratic Party.

Clinton aides would prefer that super-delegates consider a broader set of criteria, such as which candidate is likely to be more electable, or who ran the strongest in pivotal states such as Florida and Ohio. It is not clear that argument is resonating.

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