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Caucuses may give big edge

Cannon in tough fight for delegates in GOP race

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PROVO — The race for one of Utah's three congressional seats could essentially be decided as soon as tonight, more than seven months before the November general election.

Registered voters will gather at homes, offices and schools in more than 4,000 neighborhood caucus meetings around the state at 7 p.m., and the five Republicans fighting for their party's nomination in the 3rd Congressional District are all trying to use the meetings to get their supporters elected as delegates to the state convention.

Neither incumbent Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, nor top challengers David Leavitt or Jason Chaffetz will likely win enough delegates tonight to earn 60 percent of the votes at the state convention, which is what it will take to win the nomination there.

But the one who does the best tonight will have a big leg up on the others heading into the next six weeks before the convention, and come November he could look back on the neighborhood caucuses as the boost that put him into Congress.

Chaffetz has stated plainly that his strategy to unseat Cannon is to win the nomination at the convention. That would require 60 percent of the delegate vote — a high hurdle. Chaffetz is counting on the fact that delegates historically have been less friendly to Cannon than the 3rd District voters who have handily elected him to six terms.

If no candidate earns 60 percent at the convention, the top two finishers move on to a June primary, for which Leavitt is laying extensive groundwork.

Cannon, Leavitt and Chaffetz have spent a lot of time and money wooing the delegates to the 2006 convention because they estimate as much as half of those men and women will be re-elected tonight as 2008 delegates.

Of course, the candidates also have worked hard to identify supporters from West Valley City to Provo to Beaver and to encourage them, even train them, to run for the delegate posts in their neighborhood meetings.

Cannon, who is from Mapleton, will be at his voting precinct's Republican caucus at Springville Junior High. Chaffetz will be at Timberline Middle School in Alpine. Leavitt will be running his caucus as the precinct chairman in his own office in Nephi.

The other Republican candidates are Joe Ferguson and Stone Fonua.

All agreed that caucus night is a critical moment in the election, despite the fact most Utahns either don't know about it or won't participate.

"I wouldn't say the election will be decided tonight, but it will be very important," said Ryan Frandsen, Cannon's campaign manager. "We're doing everything we can to get our supporters to their caucuses."

The candidates are prepared to invite the delegates to small meetings where they can interact with them face-to-face.

"It's a big day because it sets the field of 1,200 delegates in the 3rd Congressional District," Leavitt said. "For the next six weeks, we'll be working inside the body of 1,200 delegates. Hopefully, most of those delegates will have open minds, will gravitate to the candidate whose message resonates with them. There's also a number of delegates who know who they will vote for the minute they get elected, but it will be hard to know how many of those there are."

The state Republican Party has promised to release a list of the delegates to the candidates within 48 hours.

"Tonight is huge," Chaffetz said. "We've been working for months to teach people how to become state delegates and to encourage those who are pro-Jason Chaffetz to get out and run."

Utah's caucus system is an American rarity — and remains obscure even here. That means candidates have to do more than just recruit supporters.

"We're really trying to turn our grass-roots effort into a grass fire," he said. "Most people don't know the system, so it seems intimidating. It's really just a matter of encouraging supporters to show up and have them encourage others in the neighborhood to show up."

► Election 2008

All registered voters are welcome at their party's precinct meeting. Locations are available at www.utgop.org and www.utdemocrats.org.

Combined, more than 4,000 Republican and Democratic caucus meetings are scheduled tonight.

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