



# Obama Privately Tells Donors That Time Is Coming to Unite Behind Hillary Clinton

By MAGGIE HABERMAN and MICHAEL D. SHEAR MARCH 17, 2016

In unusually candid remarks, President Obama privately told a group of Democratic donors last Friday that Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont was nearing the point at which his campaign against Hillary Clinton would end, and that the party must soon come together to back her.

Mr. Obama acknowledged that Mrs. Clinton was perceived to have weaknesses as a candidate, and that some Democrats did not view her as authentic.

But he played down the importance of authenticity, noting that President George W. Bush — whose record he ran aggressively against in 2008 — was once praised for his authenticity.

Mr. Obama made the remarks after reporters had left a fund-raising event in Austin, Tex., for the Democratic National Committee. The comments were described by three people in the room for the event, all of whom were granted anonymity to describe a candid moment with the president. The comments were later confirmed by a White House official.

Mr. Obama chose his words carefully, and did not explicitly call on Mr. Sanders to quit the race, according to those in the room. Still, those in attendance said in interviews that they took his comments as a signal to Mr. Sanders that perpetuating his campaign, which is now an uphill climb, could only help the Republicans recapture the White House.

Mr. Obama's message came at a critical juncture for Mr. Sanders, who had just upset Mrs. Clinton in the Michigan primary and has been trying to convince Democrats that his campaign is not over, despite Mrs. Clinton's formidable lead in delegates.

Mr. Obama has been careful in public to avoid disparaging Mr. Sanders, given his deeper history and relationship with Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Obama also does not want to alienate the liberal voters who have flocked to Mr. Sanders.

Mr. Obama acknowledged what have emerged as the central complaints about Mrs. Clinton among Democratic activists: that she is not generating enough excitement in her campaign, and lacks the "authenticity" of Mr. Sanders.

Those in attendance described an urgency in Mr. Obama's tone as he suggested that Democrats needed to come together to prevent an opening for the Republicans, whose leading candidate is Donald J. Trump, to exploit.

Mr. Obama addressed the group four nights before Tuesday's nominating contests, in which Mrs. Clinton was heavily favored. As it happened, Mrs. Clinton won at least four of the five states that voted — Missouri has yet to be called — further padding her delegates lead.

Mr. Obama indicated that he knew some people were not "excited" by Mrs. Clinton's candidacy, a White House official confirmed.

But, while he stressed that he was not endorsing either candidate, and that both would make good presidents, Mr. Obama went on to lavish praise on Mrs. Clinton, describing her as smart, tough and experienced, and said

that she would continue the work of his administration. Mr. Sanders has publicly criticized Mr. Obama on certain policies and has called for a “political revolution.”

Mr. Obama said that he understood the appeal to voters of a candidate who is authentic, the official said. But he also reminded the Texas donors in the room that Mr. Bush was considered authentic when he was running for president, suggesting that being authentic did not necessarily translate into being a good president, in his view.

Mr. Trump’s admirers have often praised him for his authenticity and blunt style, contrasting it with Mrs. Clinton’s more cautious approach.

The Austin event was hosted by Kirk Rudy, a real estate executive, and raised money for the Democratic National Committee. Attendees paid as much as \$33,400 a ticket.

Mr. Sanders is trying to reassure supporters and the public that he is still in pursuit of the presidency despite the long odds against him. Some of his supporters have complained that the Democratic National Committee has favored Mrs. Clinton in the primary battle.

Mr. Sanders’s campaign manager, Jeff Weaver, and his senior campaign adviser, Tad Devine, told reporters Wednesday afternoon that they believed that the senator could still make up Mrs. Clinton’s delegate lead. They added that Mr. Sanders expected to do very well in coming contests in Arizona, Wisconsin, Idaho, Utah, Washington and New York.

“We are literally about halfway through,” Mr. Weaver said.

Mr. Devine echoed those sentiments. “We agree we are behind, but we also think we are going to win this game,” he said. “We are just not intimidated by the numbers.”

Both men also said that it would be unfair to not allow voters in all states to be able to cast their ballots for Mr. Sanders and that he had the money to continue his campaign through the Democratic convention this summer.

Yamiche Alcindor contributed reporting.

*Find out what you need to know about the 2016 presidential race today, and get politics news updates via Facebook, Twitter and the First Draft newsletter.*

A version of this article appears in print on March 18, 2016, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Obama Tells Donors It’s Time to Back Clinton.