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White House Takes Aggressive Role in State Races

By [JEFF ZELENY](#) and [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#)

WASHINGTON — The White House's intervention in the race for New York governor is the latest evidence of how [President Obama](#) and his top advisers are taking an increasingly direct role in contests across the country, but their assertiveness has bruised some Democrats who suggest it could undercut Mr. Obama's appeal with voters tired of partisan politics.

The overt involvement of Mr. Obama's team in New York, where they have tried to ease Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) out of the race, has made clear that this is a White House willing to use its clout to help clear the field for favored Democratic candidates and to direct money and other resources in the way it thinks will most benefit the administration and help preserve the Democrats' majority in Congress.

The president's top strategists have recruited candidates — and nudged others to step aside — in races in Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. They said they intended to continue this practice heading into the 2010 midterm elections, as well as with an eye to the redistricting fights that will go on within states early in the next decade.

The intense involvement reflects the tactics and style of the White House chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#), who helped Democrats win the House three years ago as chairman of the Congressional campaign committee.

While some party officials applaud the White House for its efforts — there is widespread concern among Democrats that the party could suffer if Mr. Paterson runs — the actions are drawing alarm from some Democrats who believe they cross a line and run contrary to Mr. Obama's often-stated pledge to rise above partisan battles.

“The [Democratic Party](#) under [Barack Obama](#) did not come into office because of political calculation; it got

there because of audacity,” said Representative [Joe Sestak](#), a Pennsylvania Democrat who ignored White House efforts to urge him to stay out of a primary race against Senator [Arlen Specter](#). “To be seen like you are selecting winners and losers in a party-boss way will breed some resentment, and in a longer term it won’t bode well.”

As Mr. Obama flew to New York on Monday, where he appeared briefly with Mr. Paterson, the White House played down any risks in becoming embroiled in state politics. “The hazards of the job,” said [Robert Gibbs](#), the White House press secretary.

[Karl Rove](#), the chief political adviser to President [George W. Bush](#), also actively intervened in state races to make sure Republicans were fielding strong candidates. But Mr. Rove faulted this White House for what he described as its clumsy handling of the situation in New York.

“This was particularly ham-handed,” Mr. Rove said. “They shouldn’t have tried this unless they can make it happen. Even then, they should have acted in a way that was subtle, not messy and ugly.”

Democratic leaders in Congress described this White House as far more assertive than most in trying to shape the political field. “They are very engaged,” said Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. “They help with candidate recruitment. I talk to Rahm all the time.”

Administration officials denied that, saying they were being selective in which contests to become involved in, choosing races where Democrats were endangered, as in New York, or where they could help advance the president’s legislative agenda.

“The goal is not to be more involved or less involved,” Mr. Emanuel said Monday. “It is to produce a specific objective in specific situations.”

The president’s team intervenes for different reasons.

In Massachusetts, the White House is trying to ensure that the state legislature works quickly to resolve whether Gov. [Deval Patrick](#) will be given the power to appoint a replacement for Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#).

That vote could be vital to passing a health plan in the Senate.

In Colorado, Mr. Obama has endorsed Senator [Michael Bennet](#), a Democrat who was appointed to fill a vacancy. Mr. Bennet faces a primary challenger, Andrew Romanoff, a former speaker of the Colorado House, who many Democrats think could be the strongest candidate. But Mr. Bennet was assured that the White House would support him should he face a primary.

Mr. Romanoff said he was not deterred by the endorsement. "I haven't met a single person who said: 'Gosh that's it. I'm going to give up my independent judgment and give my decision to the White House,'" he said.

In Pennsylvania, the White House has rallied behind Mr. Specter, a Republican-turned-Democrat, as he faces off in a Democratic primary against Mr. Sestak. The support from the president reflects a promise Democrats made to Mr. Specter earlier this year in persuading him to switch parties.

"An endorsement by the president is a tremendous boost," Mr. Specter said. "He's the captain of the team."

More than anything, though, the interventions reflect a controlling style of this White House and of Mr. Emanuel, who employed similar hard-ball tactics to recruit candidates when he was running the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. In addition to Mr. Emanuel, the White House political director, Patrick Gaspard, and deputy chief of staff, Jim Messina, keep close watch on all political races.

Gov. [Edward G. Rendell](#) of Pennsylvania, a former chairman of the [Democratic National Committee](#), said he thought the White House was acting correctly in trying to shape the outcome of races. But he suggested that Mr. Paterson could recover if the White House gave him time, and said the Obama team had not handled this case well.

"The president is the head of the party, and he has a right to express his opinion," Mr. Rendell said. "The only thing I would have done differently is not let it become known. This can't be helpful to the governor."

The White House's interest in trying to assure the election of Democrats to Congress reflects its own legislative agenda. But in going after governors, Mr. Rove argued, the concern is more about the president himself. In New York, for example, Democrats are concerned that should Mr. Paterson remain in the race, he would invite

a challenge from [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#), the former mayor of New York who ran for president in 2008 and might again.

“The only reason they are doing this in New York,” Mr. Rove said, “is to try to strangle a potential opponent in 2012.”

Yet Democratic governors can be more helpful for a White House than Democrats in Congress. Governors have control over state government and party organizations and tend to build up a network of contributors and supporters. And with redistricting under way across the country next year, the control of statehouses is more critical.

“President Obama is not only president of the country, but head of the Democratic Party,” said Doug Sosnik, who worked as a White House political director for President [Bill Clinton](#). “The outcome of governor’s races in 2010 will have a huge impact on political power in the country for the next decade.”

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