

Clinton draws crowds, cheers in N.H.

Some question vote on Iraq

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CONCORD — Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton drew resounding applause from enthusiastic crowds yesterday as she made her first campaign appearances as a presidential candidate in New Hampshire, but she faced tough questions from residents unhappy with her vote to authorize force in Iraq.

The New York Democrat was last in the Granite State in 1996, when her husband, former president Bill Clinton, was seeking a second term.

She spoke easily and confidently yesterday to jam-packed rooms about education, healthcare, and the brutal conflict in Darfur, giving responses that won cheers and standing ovations from those who attended two town meetings in the state.

"I am wired — that's for sure!" Clinton told a crowded gymnasium in Concord, beginning what she called a "conversation" with voters that often sounded more like a pep rally.

Better-known than her husband was when he started coming to New Hampshire in late 1991, Clinton has generated excitement among some voters eager to send the first woman to the White House — a point the senator noted yesterday.

"I know some of you have thought, maybe even said, 'It's kind of hard to think about electing a woman president,'" Clinton said. "My response is that we will never know until we try," she continued, drawing cheers.



DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton greeted supporters yesterday after speaking at Concord High School in New Hampshire.

But the crowds' reaction suggested that Clinton's campaign problems with Democrats may not be about gender, but about the war in Iraq. Several questioners yesterday demanded to know why Clinton wasn't doing more to extricate the country from the unpopular war.

At a morning town meeting in the northern city of Berlin, a man asked Clinton why she would not, "once and for all," admit she had made a mistake in voting for the war. While other Democratic candidates have vehemently renounced their votes for the war or said they opposed it from the start, Clinton has declined to call her vote a mistake.

Yesterday, she repeated her explanation, saying she would not have voted for the war had she known then what she knows now — and added that if the war is still raging "when I am president," she would end it.

That answer did not satisfy Roger Tilton, who traveled from Nashua, on the state's southern border, to press Clinton on the war.

"When we hear you say that, we're not going to hear all the other great things you are saying," said Tilton, a financial planner.

In Concord, the senator faced similar questions — and got similar responses.

"I do not believe that most of us who voted to give the president authorization [for the war] thought that he would misuse the authorization that we gave him," she said. "If we could turn back the clock ... we would have never given the president the authority to go to war."

Clinton's rivals for the Democratic nomination have needled her — though not by name — on the topic.

Former senator John Edwards of North Carolina has categorically called his vote for the war a mistake, and said other senators should do the same. Senator Barack Obama, who formally announced his candidacy in his home state of Illinois yesterday in an address laced with antiwar rhetoric, has opposed the war from the start.

And Senator Christopher J.

Dodd of Connecticut has dismissed the Senate resolution denouncing the expansion of troop levels in Iraq as a meaningless gesture, taking an indirect shot at Clinton, who yesterday defended the nonbinding resolution as a first step to pressuring President Bush to change course.

The New York lawmaker gave the crowd a tutorial on Senate rules, explaining that the chamber needed 60 votes to stop debate on a measure and get it passed. Even then, she added, Bush could veto the legislation.

"I wish I could give a speech and make it all go away, but that's not how our system works," Clinton said in Concord.

Clinton is leading in opinion polls among a crowded pack of Democratic candidates. And while political analysts and some campaign officials warn that poll numbers at this early stage are not meaningful, Clinton is clearly acting like the front-runner that many surveys deem her to be.

Her events were ticketed — extremely unusual at this stage, when candidates tend to hold open, informal meet-and-greet sessions with voters. The presence of the Secret Service, based on her status as the wife of a former president, gave her appearances an aura of heightened importance.

Joking with the crowd, Clinton recalled a song she had learned in the Girl Scouts — and said she would not sing it for the group. "If you see YouTube, you'd know why," she said, referring to a video posted on the website that shows her singing the national anthem.

Clinton's visit was planned to include large town meetings and some smaller, private sessions to be held in houses today. In addition to the small gatherings in Manchester and Nashua, she was scheduled to hold a town meeting

in Keene today.

Clinton chose to hold her first town meeting in Berlin, an economically depressed city in northern Coos County. While the area is low on Democratic voters — Coos voters constituted less than 4 percent of the Democratic primary vote in 2004 — Clinton said she wanted to make a statement about her commitment to rural America.

"I am staring my presidential campaign in New Hampshire in the North Country for a very simple reason: because I want to be a president that represents all of America," said Clinton, "our small towns, our rural places that need some extra help and attention to be as successful and prosperous in the 21st century as you were in the 20th century."

Berlin in the past century has gone from being a proud, bustling city of 20,000 with four paper mills to a distressed community half that size. The city's last paper mill — located just behind the City Hall where Clinton spoke — closed in May.

The senator, like presidential candidates before her, pledged to help the ailing community. It is a challenge that Clinton said she is has taken on in upstate New York, where the decline of the steel industry hit the local economy hard.

She touted economic initiatives — such as getting eBay to work with 15 rural businesses and increasing the amount of high-speed Internet in rural areas — and some of the proposals she believes would help the area if elected president.

"People view the site as a tremendous opportunity even if they are divided as to what exactly to do with it," said Katharine Ene-guess, president of the local technical college. "But the people are strong and skeptical of politicians who promise big things."