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Hopefuls look to Election '04

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Democratic Party leaders get ready to challenge Bush

By **CHARLES BOOTH**

The Leaf-Chronicle

Vermont Gov. Howard Dean may be the Democratic front-runner for the 2004 presidential election if a straw poll held in Montgomery and Robertson counties Saturday is any indication.

Democrats from across the state converged on the Charles Hand Farm located at the counties' border for their party's fifth annual Middle Tennessee Labor Day Celebration, and the upcoming election year remained the topic of interest among the approximately 2,000 people in attendance.

Representatives **for Democratic** candidates, such as Sen. John Edwards, Sen. Joe Lieberman, Rep. Richard Gephardt and Sen. John Kerry, came out with hopes of winning one of **the** Southeast's largest **straw polls**. **Democrats** hope **the poll** will reveal how Tennesseans will vote **in the** Feb. 10 **Presidential** Primary, which is good news **for Dean** supporters.

"I hope this shows that **Howard Dean is a** viable candidate here **in the** South," said Gary Cobb, a volunteer **for the Dean** campaign. "This was purely a grass roots effort, and it's a result of **Howard Dean's** appeal."

Tennessee Democratic Party Chairman Randy Button believes **the state** will play an influential role **in the** coming **presidential election**.

"**For a Democrat** to win, they're going to have to win three or four Southern **states**," he said. "I think **Tennessee is** going to **be** very relative."

Dean earned 348 votes, while Gephardt came **in** second with 233 votes. Edwards rounded out **the** top three with 125 votes.

"I think we have a good top tier of candidates," U.S. Rep. Bart Gordon said **at the** picnic. "**In the** next few months, we'll see somebody step forward. It's a good process to go through."

The evening ended with **the straw poll**, but much of **the** afternoon focused **on the Democratic Party's** unhappiness with President George W. Bush.

"I think **the** president has pursued policies domestically and internationally that have not served us well," U.S. Rep. Harold Ford Jr., said. "**The** president isn't a bad guy, but his policy hasn't worked."

Gov. Phil Bredesen addressed those **in** attendance, telling them President Bush will **be in** Nashville Monday to discuss **the** No Child Left Behind Act.

"**The** president, I can't even say our president or my president anymore," Bredesen said. "We all know

there are problems. I don't need someone to come here and tell me we got problems with public education. I need someone with some damned solutions."

Democrats said they plan to hold a rally outside **the** Vanderbilt Plaza Hotel Monday, where Bush is scheduled to host a fund-raising dinner.

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STRAW POLL

The top three candidates **in the straw poll** were:

- **Howard Dean** - 348 votes
- Richard Gephardt - 233 votes
- John Edwards - 125 votes

Photo Captions:

U.S. Rep. Harold Ford, Jr. talks to young military wives, **from** left, Rebecca Bishop, Michelle Rivera and Michelle Reese **at Democratic presidential candidates' straw poll rally Saturday at the Charles Hand Farm**. Donna Wilson/**The Leaf-Chronicle**

In photo **at** left, U.S. Rep. John Tanner and **State** Sen. Rosalind Kurita were among **the** politicians who attended **the Democratic presidential candidates' straw poll Saturday**. **In** photo **at** right, **Gov.** Phil Bredesen, Rep. Kim McMillian, Rep. Bart Gordon and Congressman Ford also came to show party support. Donna Wilson/**The Leaf-Chronicle**

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