Democrats see path to victory

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

3:54 AM EDT, July 16, 2012

HOLLYWOOD

Democrats' signature achievement, the health care law, gets a thumbs down from half of Florida's voters. The party's lone holder of a statewide office, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, is fighting for his political life. And President Barack Obama may not capture Florida's cache of electoral votes this time.

Happy days are definitely not here again for Florida's Democrats, who gathered for a weekend of meetings and money-raising at the Westin Diplomat Resort. Though Democratic elected officials and party bigwigs professed optimism, the bottom line is that in November, there's roughly a 50-50 chance Florida could vote Republican for the presidency and U.S. Senate.

Beyond the upbeat talk for public consumption, the Democrats know this, and are mobilizing in various ways, from fine-tuning their message to energizing key constituencies and bringing in the heavy artillery. Obama himself will spend two days campaigning in Florida this week, visiting Jacksonville and West Palm Beach on Thursday, overnighting in Manalapan, and heading to Fort Myers and Orlando on Friday. Venues and ticketing arrangements haven't been announced.

Florida's Democrats are attempting to recover from years of being out-organized and out-funded by the Republicans.

"You look at how effective they are, if you're a Democrat you've got to get pretty depressed," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

Though it's sometimes difficult to see from South Florida, where Democrats hold most elected offices in Broward and Palm Beach counties, Wagner said, "statewide, the electoral results of the Democratic Party haven't been disappointing, they've been disastrous. While optimism springs eternal, there's very little evidence that there's much to be optimistic [about]."

In 2012, that's true even at the very top of the ticket. John Ramos, state Democratic committeeman from Palm Beach County and vice chairman of the state party's Hispanic Caucus, thinks Obama can win Florida for a second time. Four years ago, Obama won the state with 51 percent of the vote, and nobody is predicting any easier race this time.

"The reality check is it's going to be tough," Ramos said during a break in activities at the Diplomat. "It's going to be a close race. We can't get too comfortable."
Speaking to the party's Hispanic Caucus, state Democratic chairman Rod Smith likened the 2012 presidential race to a football game being fought between the 46-yard lines — with 46 percent of Florida voters committed to Obama and 46 percent to Republican Mitt Romney.

Though Democratic voter registrations outnumber Republicans in Florida, that didn't help the party in 2010, when enthusiastic Republicans turned out en masse, swamping Democrats whose interest was tepid. This year, Republicans enjoy a larger-than-usual fundraising advantage thanks largely to SuperPACs and their affiliates that can raise and spend massive amounts of cash on advertising. Nelson said those groups have already spent $8 million on ads against him and just reserved another $6 million of TV time.

Democrats who attended the weekend proceedings here cited several ways they're hoping to counter the Republican money advantage:

**ORGANIZATION:** Palm Beach County Democratic Chairman Mark Alan Siegel said his party has developed a network of neighborhood activists to promote candidates to their friends and coworkers — and to make sure they're registered and voting.

Democrats also note the Obama campaign never left Florida after the 2008 election, maintaining a political organization that it's ramped up to 40 field offices around the state. Romney's campaign didn't begin extensively organizing its Florida ground game until the former Massachusetts government emerged victorious from months of grueling primary contests, including Florida's.

**KEY VOTING BLOCS:** The party is attempting to make sure that all of the constituency groups that make up the Democratic coalition are interested and engaged.

Sometimes the involvement is basic. Diane Hard, a former Hillsborough County state committeewoman, asked members of the Democratic Party's Black Caucus, meeting at the Diplomat, to "Tell your friends and family: vote the entire ballot from top to bottom,"

And sometimes it's a series of small actions, like the plan announced over the weekend to have different Democratic groups hold a day of activities across the state on Aug. 26 as Republicans begin to assemble in Tampa for their national convention to formally nominate Romney. Black Democrats will target African-American churches, gay and lesbian activists will organize parties at gay bars, and veterans will sell the president at American Legion halls.

**MESSAGING:** At the Hollywood gathering, Democrats at all levels repeated the same themes over and over. Speaking to reporters and in speeches at the big Saturday night dinner, party leaders repeatedly invoked the name of Republican Gov. Rick Scott, who isn't on the ballot in November but who polls show is exceedingly unpopular with Florida voters. U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston, chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, said voters wouldn't like the "Romney-Scott vision."
Smith, the state Democratic chairman, said he also hopes to link the often controversial and incendiary rhetoric of U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Palm Beach Gardens, to the Republican Party as a whole.

And virtually every Democrat who got near a microphone — from Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the keynote speaker, to Broward Democratic Chairman Mitch Ceasar — evoked the mantra of the "middle class," attempting to portray Romney and the Republicans as the party that favors the rich at the expense of, in Wasserman Schultz' words, "millions of hard-working Floridians."

The Democrats' weekend wasn't devoted entirely to poll-tested messages and strategy. There was also hours of libation-fueled networking and schmoozing about who was up, and who was down in the party and Florida politics in general — so much that hundreds of people were still milling about in the lobby as the first speaker started and Villaraigosa pleaded with people to pipe down and sit down before he began talking.

Bringing in money was also a major motivation. The Saturday night dinner for 1,000 brought in an estimated $750,000 — before Smith took to the lectern and cranked up the peer pressure to encourage people to pitch in more, an effort he estimated may have added another $20,000 to party coffers.