

President Obama Has a Message About the Democratic Presidential Primary Race

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders had a rare Oval Office meeting on Wednesday with President Barack Obama, just days after Obama praised Hillary Clinton, Sanders' rival and the front-runner in the race to become the Democratic presidential candidate.

Emerging from the White House after an hour, Sanders said the meeting was "constructive" and said Obama was trying to be as "even-handed" as possible in the race, dismissing commentary that Obama was favoring Clinton, his former secretary of state.

"I don't believe that at all," the senator from Vermont told reporters on the White House driveway.

While Obama has not explicitly endorsed a candidate, he showered praise on Clinton's experience in an interview with Politico while noting that Sanders has had the "luxury of being a complete long shot."

Obama suggested Sanders has not yet faced intense scrutiny and would need to broaden his populist message to go further in the race to be the Democratic candidate in the November election.

Sanders said he gotten an overview of current foreign policy issues from Obama, and said the two talked "a little politics."

The White House said the meeting had been in the works since Sanders asked Obama for some face time when he saw him a month ago at a holiday party for lawmakers.

It came just ahead of the first contests to pick the

Democratic and Republican nominees: Iowa, on Monday, and New Hampshire, on Feb. 9. While Sanders has surged in recent opinion polls, Clinton still has the edge nationally.

Obama and his aides have regular contact with Clinton – his former secretary of state – and her staff, which includes former Obama White House staffers.

Clinton dropped by the White House for an informal lunch on Dec. 7 and had an hour-long chat in March.

The White House visitor logs show Sanders making only one previous solo visit with Obama in the Oval Office, on Dec. 15, 2014. Sanders has regularly attended group meetings at the White House with other Democratic lawmakers as well as social events.

On Tuesday, Sanders put a hold on Obama's nominee for the Food and Drug Administration, claiming the nominee is too close to the pharmaceutical industry.

Until lifted, the hold would prevent the Senate from holding a vote on confirming cardiologist Dr. Robert Califf for the top regulatory job.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said he did not know whether the FDA appointment came up during the meeting.

(Additional reporting by Ayesha Rascoe; editing by Susan Heavey)

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