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Election 2008

GOP race in Mich. is up for grabs

Poll: Romney and Huckabee are front-runners as Giuliani support dwindles, McCain slips slightly.

Gordon Trowbridge / Detroit News Washington Bureau

Michigan's Republican presidential primary is a wide-open, volatile race, with Rudy Giuliani's support dropping by more than half in the past month, while Mike Huckabee's has doubled. With less than a month before the Jan. 15 primary, a Detroit News/WXYZ-Action News poll shows Michigan native Mitt Romney with 21 percent and Huckabee at 19 percent -- a lead within the poll's 4-point error margin. Giuliani dropped from 28 percent in mid-November to 12 percent today; Arizona Sen. John McCain, who won Michigan's 2000 primary, is at 10 percent, compared with 12 percent last month.

There's strong evidence that the candidates have lots of work to do here, and that momentum from the Jan. 3 Iowa caucuses and Jan. 8 New Hampshire primary will loom large in Michigan's primary. A quarter of this state's voters is still undecided or would vote "uncommitted" -- which is an option on the Michigan ballot -- if the election were held today. And nearly two-thirds of the candidates' support is soft: 39 percent of those voters who have chosen sides say they are absolutely committed and won't change their minds.

"The best way to win Michigan is to win the New Hampshire primary a week before," said Mike Murphy, a Republican consultant who has worked in the past with Romney and on McCain's 2000 campaign.

Many voters say they have only recently engaged in the Republican race -- and many of those who have are still looking for a clear choice to emerge.

"Of all these candidates, very few have really grabbed me and made me think, 'This guy is dynamic, he can lead the country to better things.' I don't hear that," said Mick Narusch, 58, a Shelby Township Republican who said he is still undecided.

Poll shows a state divided

The News/WXYZ poll of 612 Michiganians who intend to vote in the GOP primary shows a geographic divide between Metro Detroit, which is Romney territory, and Huckabee's outstate base. Romney, the son of late Michigan Gov. George Romney, is the favorite of 27 percent of primary voters in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, compared with Giuliani's 17 percent and Huckabee's 9 percent. But outstate, Huckabee is the choice of 23 percent of voters, compared with 18 percent for Romney and 10 percent for Giuliani.

Huckabee has no campaign organization in Michigan and has made two campaign trips to the state. But he has been buoyed by his rise in Iowa and nationally, and by the support of religious conservatives. The former Arkansas governor is supported by about half of Michigan voters who have made their decision in the last three weeks, and one-third of voters say they are more likely to vote for him because he is a Baptist minister who has promised to be a "Christian leader."

Huckabee also leads Romney, 28-15, among self-described evangelical Christians, who make up

about one-fifth of the likely primary voters.

Giuliani, the former New York mayor who has led national polls throughout the summer and fall, has slipped in national polls as well as in Michigan, calling into question a campaign strategy that largely has bypassed early states such as Michigan in favor of Florida's Jan. 29 contest and the two-dozen states voting on Super Tuesday, Feb. 5.

His supporters in Michigan, led by U.S. Rep. Candice Miller of Harrison Township, say they believe Giuliani can win some delegates in Michigan because the state GOP awards some delegates to the winner in each of the state's 15 congressional districts. Reacting to the poll, Giuliani spokesman Jarrod Agen pointed to Giuliani's strength in Metro Detroit, where his support trailed only Romney's. It is Romney for whom Michigan carries the greatest importance. The former Massachusetts governor, who grew up in Bloomfield Hills, has the largest Michigan organization, and has begun television advertising here ahead of his competitors. His support has remained relatively level in Michigan, where he was once rivaled by Giuliani and now, as in Iowa, is trying to hold off Huckabee.

"The race in Michigan is where we expected to be at this point in the election, very competitive," said Romney spokeswoman Sarah Pompei. "We will continue to build on the strong grassroots support for Gov. Romney in his home state and we'll work hard to earn every vote on election day."

Many voters undecided

Perhaps the most significant finding of the poll is the large pool of voters who are undecided or less than fully committed to their chosen candidate. Sixteen percent say they would vote for "uncommitted." Michigan votes of both parties will have that option, and if at least 15 percent of voters in either contest make that choice, they would send delegates who are unpledged to any candidate to the party's national convention.

Another 10 percent say they are undecided. And of those who have made a pick, two out of five say they are certain they won't change their mind.

Even among those following the race closely, there is indecision.

"I've been watching the debates, following what they say talking in interviews and what have you. I'm just not sure," said Betty Aurand, 73, of Edwardsburg. She said likes Huckabee's anti-abortion position and Texas Rep. Ron Paul's anti-government economic policies, as well as Giuliani's performance in New York after the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The unsettled electorate reflects the state of the race nationally, where no clear front-runner has emerged, and in the states preceding Michigan. McCain is hoping for a repeat of his 2000 victory in Michigan, based on a surge in New Hampshire that shows the Arizona senator pulling close to or even with Romney there.

John Yob, a Michigan native and McCain's deputy national political director, said the campaign believes momentum from New Hampshire Jan. 8 can carry McCain to a Michigan win seven days later.

McCain's strategy also depends on support from independents and Democrats drawn to the GOP race because of the shrunken Democratic primary in Michigan. About 12 percent of those who said they are likely Republican primary voters are independents or Democrats, but Yob questioned whether the actual crossover vote will be larger.

The Democratic primary in Michigan has become a noncontest because Democratic candidates are boycotting the state and four contenders won't appear on the Democratic ballot.

"We believe very strongly that more than 12 percent of the voters in the Michigan primary will be independents or conservative Democrats, as was the case in 2000," Yob said.

"The poll shows it's anybody's race, and the result in Michigan will largely depend on momentum coming out of New Hampshire."


After McCain, the falloff among the candidates, according to The News/WXYZ survey, is dramatic: former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson, who drew 13 percent last month, is at 4 percent, along with Paul. California Rep. Duncan Hunter and Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo, who dropped out of the race Thursday, each stand at 1 percent.

The survey was conducted for The News and WXYZ by Lansing polling firm EPIC-MRA. The scientific telephone survey of 612 likely GOP primary voters was conducted Sunday through Wednesday.

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