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N.C. voters' top concern: Trust

JIM MORRILL

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama leads rival Hillary Clinton among N.C. voters, in part because voters say they value trustworthiness over experience.

And N.C. voters gave Arizona Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, higher marks than either Democrat on both counts, as well as on his credentials to keep the country safe, according to a new Observer/WCNC Poll.

"(It's) his whole background," said Democrat Robert Brown, 46, an online trader from Chapel Hill. "He was a prisoner of war. He's an upfront, straight-talking man."

The poll found that trust is the top consideration for most voters. Nearly nine in 10 said it would play a big role in determining their vote.

Only 25 percent of voters gave Clinton high marks for trustworthiness, compared with 54 percent for McCain and 48 percent for Obama. Even Democrats ranked Clinton lower.

"I don't trust her because of the fact that she's having Bill (Clinton) pretty much run the race for her," said Sarah McClary, a 33-year-old nurse from High Point. "And all her stories are pretty much coming back to bite her in the butt."

The poll was conducted as news reports contradicted Clinton's account of once coming under sniper fire in Bosnia. It mirrors a recent Gallup Poll that found 53 percent of Americans say Clinton isn't "honest and trustworthy." Just 29 percent said the same for Obama, an Illinois senator, and 27 percent said it of McCain.

Other polls have shown a similar "honesty gap" between Clinton and Obama.

Clinton's claims of experience don't appear to be helping her among N.C. voters.

Her campaign slogan is "Ready on Day One." But N.C. voters say McCain is best prepared to walk into the White House and lead. And as many Democrats give Obama high marks for readiness as they do Clinton. The New York senator has tried to underscore her national security credentials in other states with a TV ad featuring a ringing phone.

"It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep," a voice says over pictures of children tucked in bed. "But there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world ... Who do you want answering the phone?"

But just 39 percent of likely Democratic primary voters give Clinton high marks for her security credentials, barely more than Obama's 34 percent. Even Democrats ranked McCain higher than either candidate.

The poll also found:

- Two out of three voters give Obama high marks for his ability to connect with voters. That compares with a third who gave McCain and Clinton high marks.
- Three of four voters ranked Obama high in intelligence. That's more than the two-thirds who gave his rivals high marks.
- N.C. voters say they're also looking for candidates who aren't afraid to take tough stands, who offer the ability to unite the country and who hold the promise of change.

The poll suggests that the contest could lie in the hands of undecided voters such as John Clark, a Charlotte salesman.

"Until either of them can ... distinguish between their policy positions or electability, I'm probably going to stay on the fence," said Clark, 29.

The poll didn't ask about general election match-ups. But 20 percent of Clinton supporters say they would vote for McCain if their candidate doesn't win the Democratic nomination.

That compares with 13 percent of Obama supporters who say they'd vote for McCain if Obama is not the nominee.

Fully a third of voters said McCain's age -- he's 71 -- could hurt him in a general election.

-- McClatchy reporters Steven Thomma and William Douglas contributed.

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Coming up

We'll have more on what's on voters' minds in coming days.

Tonight: Our news partner, WCNC-TV, digs into the issue that ranks almost as high as the economy to people across the state.

Sunday: Voters are concerned about the economy, particularly the cost of gas and health insurance. On WCNC News Sunday Morning, watch Observer reporter Jim Morrill break down the numbers with WCNC's Bobby Sisk.

Monday: Weeks before the May 6 primary, most voters are still undecided.

Obama leads Clinton in N.C.

Democrat Barack Obama leads Hillary Clinton 35 percent to 26 percent among likely voters in North Carolina's May 6 Democratic primary. But nearly four in 10 are still undecided.

