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CHICAGO TRIBUNE/ WGN-TV POLL

## Barack Obama and John McCain lead rivals 2-1 in Illinois, poll shows

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Favorite-son Sen. Barack Obama and Arizona Sen. John McCain each hold a better than 2-1 edge over their closest presidential rivals entering the Illinois primary, but many voters say they're still undecided or could change their mind before casting a ballot Tuesday, a new Tribune/WGN-TV poll shows.

The final survey before Illinois voters play their role in the Super Tuesday presidential contests in more than 20 states shows Hillary Clinton has lost support among African-American voters in the Democratic race while McCain has seen a surge in support among conservative Republicans who have distrusted him.

The survey found Obama, a first-term Illinois senator from Chicago, had the support of 55 percent of likely Democratic primary voters. Clinton, a two-term New York senator born in Chicago and raised in suburban Park Ridge, had 24 percent.

On the Republican side, McCain, a veteran Arizona senator, had the backing of 43 percent of likely GOP primary voters in the state, compared with 20 percent for former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, 15 percent for former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas and 4 percent for U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas.

Despite the commanding advantages held by Obama and McCain, the survey still found 20 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans undecided heading into the primary. And among those backing a candidate for president, nearly a quarter of Democrats and more than a third of Republicans said they could still change their minds.

The indecision was reflective of a quickly shifting presidential landscape in which surviving candidates have become more aggressive in trying to win nomination.



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The survey, involving separate samples of 500 Republicans and 500 Democrats who said they were likely to take part in the state's accelerated primary Tuesday, has an error margin of 4.4 percentage points. The Democratic poll began Tuesday and the Republican poll began Wednesday; both polls concluded Thursday.

All Republicans were surveyed after McCain defeated Romney in last Tuesday's Florida primary and after Rudy Giuliani, a former New York mayor, had announced he would drop out of the GOP contest.

Democrats were surveyed after the Florida balloting, and additional polling was conducted to reflect former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards' departure from the race.

At stake in the Illinois contest is its large pool of presidential nominating delegates for the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

Despite Obama's stature in Illinois, Clinton is seeking at least 15 percent support statewide as well as in each of the state's 19 congressional districts to gain delegates under national party rules. Republicans in the state will be directly electing delegates pledged to support their preferred candidate at the GOP's national convention.

Before a caucus or primary had been held, Obama led Clinton 50 percent to 25 percent in a similar Tribune survey conducted in mid-December. Since then, as the Democratic race turned into a one-on-one contest, Obama has gained support in Illinois while Clinton showed little change. But the number of undecided voters has nearly doubled.

The new poll showed Obama's strong popularity among Illinois Democrats was bolstered by a growing confidence that he could win the White House.

When asked which candidate has the best chance of beating a Republican in November, 48 percent of Democrats said Obama, compared with 23 percent for Clinton. In December, Democrats were almost evenly divided between Obama and Clinton over who would be the better general election candidate.

The most recent poll found support for Clinton among black voters dropped by 10 percentage points and her favorable rating among African-Americans fell almost 20 percentage points amid charges her campaign sought to inject race into the contest.

At the same time, Obama, the first black contender with a legitimate chance of becoming a major party presidential nominee, gained 7 percentage points among black voters as well as white voters.

Obama voters were also more sure of their choice than Clinton supporters. One-third of Clinton supporters said they could still change their mind before voting Tuesday, compared to one-in-five Obama backers.

The Republican survey contest reflects the dramatic changes that have occurred since December, when Giuliani had a 23 percent to 21 percent edge over Huckabee among likely GOP voters in the state. That earlier poll found McCain in fourth place with 12 percent support, behind Romney with 14 percent.

Since that time, McCain has gained momentum by winning contests in New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida, interrupted by Romney's victories in Wyoming, Nevada and Michigan.

The new poll found McCain making wholesale gains among Republicans who describe themselves as either very or fairly conservative, potentially the result of former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson's departure from the race and Huckabee's failure to win a contest since Iowa.

Conservatives traditionally have great influence in the state's GOP primary, but in the past, they have questioned McCain's Republican credentials given his maverick role in Congress.

While few conservatives supported McCain in December, he now leads his rivals among those voters. He was backed by 42 percent of fairly conservative Republicans and 32 percent of very conservative GOP voters in the new poll.

In addition, McCain benefited from Giuliani's withdrawal among Republicans who describe themselves as moderates. Previously, the two had split the moderate vote but now McCain holds 55 percent.

Among all Republican voters, 56 percent said they believed McCain had the best chance to keep the White House in GOP hands, while only 16 percent chose Romney and 4 percent selected Huckabee. In December, only 6 percent of Republicans thought McCain had the best chance of winning in November, far behind Giuliani, Huckabee and Romney.

Still, 36 percent of Republicans who expressed a choice for a nominee said they could change their mind before Tuesday. That includes 41 percent of those backing Huckabee, 38 percent supporting McCain and 31 percent for Romney.

If the state's Democrats and Republicans can agree on one thing, it's that a majority of them believe that jobs and the economy are the most important issue. Asked their top two issues of concern, 62 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of Republicans listed the economy and its effect on employment.

Democrats cited affordable health care and the Iraq war as their second and third top concerns. Republicans made illegal immigration the issue of next highest concern behind the economy, with the Iraq war reflected third.

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