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GOP poll: Huckabee maintains lead over Romney

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Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist minister riding a wave of support from fundamentalist Christians, tops Mitt Romney for first place in a new Des Moines Register poll of Iowans planning to attend Thursday's Republican caucuses.

In a battle of former governors from Arkansas and Massachusetts, Huckabee leads Romney, 32 percent to 26 percent.

"I really like it that he is a religious man and social conservative. That is pretty important to me, especially the right to life," said Huckabee supporter Alyssa Stealey, 20, of Charter Oak, who is also drawn to his call for tax reform.

Huckabee, Obama maintain leads

The size of Huckabee's lead is virtually unchanged from the last Iowa Poll taken in late November, despite Romney's hard-charging effort to regain the

top spot that he held earlier in the year.

The new poll, taken over four days ending on Sunday, shows a resurgent Arizona Sen. John McCain grabbing third place in the Republican race for the first-in-the-nation caucuses. McCain tallies support from 13 percent in the poll -- a 6-point improvement since late November.

"He is not too far to the left or too far to the right," said Keith Olejniczak, a 42-year-old poll participant from Cedar Rapids who makes McCain his second choice after Huckabee because of McCain's experience and leadership ability. "I think (both candidates) could get more things done from both sides of Congress," said Olejniczak, who works in transportation.

On McCain's heels in the poll at 9 percent each are Texas Rep. Ron Paul, whose support in Iowa has gradually been building, and former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson.

The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

A win in Iowa can serve as a springboard to success in New Hampshire, which holds its primary on Jan. 8, and other states with early primary contests. But even a third-place finish in the caucuses could give a candidate a boost, especially if he exceeds expectations.


The latest Des Moines Register poll shows former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani falling back in the pack. Giuliani is favored by just 5 percent of Iowans who say they definitely or probably will attend the Republican caucuses on Jan. 3.

In the late November poll, Giuliani placed third at 13 percent. He has campaigned little in Iowa since then as he pursues a more unconventional strategy of cultivating support in delegate-rich

states that come later on the nominating calendar.

California Rep. Duncan Hunter and former Ambassador Alan Keyes round out the new poll by drawing 1 percent each. That leaves 4 percent who are unsure about their preferred candidate.

The poll shows there remains enough indecision among likely caucus participants to scramble both the race for first place between Huckabee and Romney, and the battle for third. Nearly one-half of caucusgoers say they could still be persuaded to support another candidate.

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align="left">Huckabee, whose Iowa support has soared in the last two months, continues to benefit from the backing of religious conservatives who have an affinity for him and the values he espouses:

- Nearly one-half of likely Republican caucusgoers describe themselves as born-again or fundamentalist Christians. Within that large group, Huckabee outpolls Romney, 47 percent to 20 percent. Romney has faced questions about his religious standing as a Mormon.
- Among those who think it's more important for the next president to be a social conservative than a fiscal conservative, Huckabee leads Romney 48 percent to 24 percent. Romney holds a much narrower lead over Huckabee -- 29 percent to 25 percent -- among those who say it's more important to be fiscally conservative.
- Among those caucusgoers who think it is very important for them to agree with a candidate's religious beliefs, 54 percent favor Huckabee. - Huckabee scores highest in the poll as the candidate who matches caucusgoers' own core principles.

The poll shows religious beliefs matter a great deal to likely Republican caucus participants in general. Those who think it helps the Republican Party to place greater emphasis on Christian beliefs outnumber those who think it is hurtful to the party, 47 percent to 29 percent.

Only about one-fourth of likely GOP caucusgoers say it is unimportant for them to agree with candidates' religious beliefs.

Stealey, a junior majoring in political science at Iowa State University, says having a religion is very important in a candidate because "faith equals ethics and ethics should be used in all decisions."

She said she's drawn to Huckabee because he's consistent in his views -- unlike Romney whom she finds untrustworthy because he has shifted positions on issues like abortion.

Olejniczak likes Huckabee for other reasons, including the candidate's demeanor as a sincere person who is not "all glitter." But the Huckabee's religious beliefs don't figure into his support for the candidate.

"Religion has its place, but it doesn't belong in politics," Olejniczak said.

Romney shines in other poll findings. The former Massachusetts governor outpolls Huckabee and his other rivals as the candidate with the experience and competence to lead the country -- the highest ranked trait in the poll. Romney also comes out on top as the Republican candidate best able to bring about needed change, and as the contender who is best able to defeat the Democratic nominee in the general election. He ties with Huckabee as the candidate who will be most successful in unifying the country if elected president.

"He would help secure our borders, finish the conflict in Iraq, not raise taxes. I just like him," said poll participant Cindy Thompson, a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture employee.

Thompson said Romney is her top choice for president because she believes he would be a strong leader and his core beliefs are similar to hers. It doesn't bother her that he is a Mormon or that he has changed his position on abortion.

"I've changed my position and so have a lot of other people," said Thompson, 51, of Pleasant Hill.

She's troubled by Huckabee's record as Arkansas governor in raising some taxes and approving clemency for a number of convicts.

Both leading candidates can claim pockets of strength among likely caucusgoers. Huckabee outpolls Romney, 41 percent to 27 percent, among women younger than 55.

A low caucus turnout would appear to benefit Romney, who has the best-financed campaign. A 56 majority of his supporters say they definitely will attend the caucuses. That compares with 48 percent for Huckabee and 44 percent for McCain.

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