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California Poll: Clinton Leads, McCain and Romney Close

One-fifth of California voters already voted via absentee ballot

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- New *USA Today*/Gallup polling looks at the state of the presidential race in California some 10 days before this state votes as part of the crucial Super Tuesday set of primaries.

Republican Race

At this point, John McCain and Mitt Romney dominate the field as California Republican voters look ahead to the Feb. 5 primary in the nation's largest state. McCain has an 8-point edge among a broad sample of GOP voters who say they have already voted via absentee ballot or who plan to vote on or before Feb. 5. McCain's margin is slightly smaller among the subset of voters who can be considered most likely to vote. McCain and Romney are tied among voters who claim to be certain about their choice and unlikely to change.

California voters' preferences may be altered in the week and a half left before the California vote -- not only by continuing campaigning and advertising, but also by the results of the important Florida Republican primary, which will be held Jan. 29. At the same time, a substantial number of voters claim to have already cast absentee ballots, votes that cannot be changed regardless of what happens between now and Feb. 5.

Vote Intentions as of Jan. 23-26

The four-day *USA Today*/Gallup Poll was conducted Wednesday through Saturday. Over this period, almost one out of five registered Republicans indicated that they had already voted via absentee ballot.

Those who had already voted were asked for whom they had voted, while those who said they planned on voting were asked for whom they intended to vote.

The results of this question are presented in two ways here. The "high turnout" figures represent the responses of all registered Republicans who said they had voted or planned to vote. The "low turnout" figures are based on those deemed most likely to vote, as determined by their responses to a set of questions measuring current turnout intentions and past voting behavior.

The Republican Race: California

Jan. 23-26, 2008

	High-turnout election	Low-turnout election
	%	%
John McCain	35	36
Mitt Romney	27	31
Mike Huckabee	12	10
Rudy Giuliani	11	9
Ron Paul	5	4
Alan Keyes	1	1
Other	2	1
None/No opinion	7	8

GALLUP POLL

The results make it clear that two candidates -- McCain and Romney -- are the dominant players at this point in California. McCain has a slight lead over Romney, but one that appears smaller among those most likely to vote in a lower-turnout election.

Rudy Giuliani, who had been leading in California polls as recently as last December, is far behind the two front-runners and essentially tied with Mike Huckabee. Ron Paul trails even further behind.

About a third of registered Republican voters in California said they could change their minds about voting between the time they were interviewed and the day of the primary, suggesting that the structure of this primary election could change significantly in the days ahead.

Of those who are certain about their vote, McCain and Romney are tied, further underscoring the conclusion that the California race could in the end tilt toward either of these two candidates.

The Republican Race: California

Factoring in certainty of voting

Jan. 23-26, 2008

	High-turnout election	Low-turnout election
	%	%
McCain, certain	18	21
Romney, certain	18	22
Huckabee, certain	7	6
Giuliani, certain	6	6
Paul, certain	3	4
Keyes, certain	*	*
Unspecified, certain ^	4	6
Could change mind	39	32
No preference	4	3

* Less than 0.5%

^ Unspecified, certain category represents early voters who did not disclose who they voted for

GALLUP POLL

Democratic Primary

Registered Democrats in California are similar to registered Republicans in terms of their reports of having already voted via absentee ballot. One out of five said that at the time of the interview, they had already voted.

The results of the ballot question, asked of both registered Democrats and independents who said they would vote in the Democratic primary, show Hillary Clinton with a solid lead among Democrats and independents. Clinton has a slightly higher lead among those who can be deemed most likely to vote in a lower-turnout election.

The Democratic Race: California

Jan. 23-26, 2008

	High-turnout election	Low-turnout election
	%	%
Hillary Clinton	47	51
Barack Obama	35	33
John Edwards	10	10
Mike Gravel	*	--
Other	2	2
None/No opinion	6	4

* Less than 0.5%

Note: Dennis Kucinich withdrew from the race during the field period, and he was removed from the questionnaire beginning with Jan. 24 interviewing. Kucinich voters from Jan. 23 are included in the Other category.

GALLUP POLL

Clinton leads Barack Obama by 12 points to 18 points, depending on turnout assumptions. John Edwards languishes much further behind.

About a fifth to a quarter of Democratic voters say they may still change their minds about their vote choice. Among those who claim to be certain of their choice at this time, Clinton still wins, but by a diminished margin.

The Democratic Race: California

Factoring in certainty of voting

Jan. 23-26, 2008

	High-turnout election	Low-turnout election
	%	%
Clinton, certain	35	41
Obama, certain	27	27
Edwards, certain	7	8
Gravel, certain	--	--
Unspecified, certain^	1	2
Could change mind	24	19
No preference	5	3

GALLUP POLL

The most important factor that could change the voting intentions of California Democrats may be the results of Saturday's South Carolina primary, which became known after interviewing for this survey had been completed. Obama's substantial win in that state, and the publicity surrounding it, could well have an effect on California Democrats, with the most obvious possibility being that Obama would gain.

Additionally, of course, the candidates will be campaigning in California in the days leading up to the Feb. 5 vote, and that could affect the final outcome.

Survey Methods

The Republican results are based on interviews conducted Jan. 23-26, 2008, with 755 California Republican registered voters who plan to vote (or have voted) in the Republican presidential primary. For this sample, the maximum margin of error attributable to sampling is ± 4 percentage points. The Republican results displayed for a "high-turnout election" are based on this broad group of Republican voters.

For results based on the sample of 552 Republican voters in a "low-turnout election," the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 5 percentage points. This smaller sample represents Republican primary voters who appear most likely to vote in the primary based on responses to a set of questions about current interest in the election and past voting behavior.

The Democratic results are based on interviews conducted Jan. 23-26, 2008, with 779 California Democratic or independent registered voters who plan to vote (or have voted) in the Democratic presidential primary. For this sample, the maximum margin of error attributable to sampling is ± 4 percentage points. The Democratic results displayed for a "high-turnout election" are based on this broad group of Democratic voters.

For results based on the sample of 517 Democratic voters in a "low-turnout election," the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 5 percentage points. This smaller sample represents Democratic primary voters who appear most likely to vote in the primary based on responses to a set of questions about current interest in the election and past voting behavior.

Interviews were conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone in their household) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

Approximately 6% of the total interviews were conducted in Spanish.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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