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CAMPAIGN 2008

Illinois Democrats favor Obama 2-1

But voters are not sure he can win it all in November; Giuliani in lead for GOP

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Favorite son Barack Obama holds a 2-1 advantage over native daughter Hillary Clinton among Democrats looking to cast ballots in Illinois' Feb. 5 presidential primary, but voters are split between the two when asked who has the best chance of winning the White House, a new Tribune/WGN-TV poll shows.

Among Republican voters in the state, the poll shows that former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee's surge of support in Iowa also has reached Illinois. He and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani are in a virtual dead heat atop the list of GOP contenders, though few of those polled said they believe Huckabee would win the general election.



The first survey of likely Illinois voters leading up to the state's accelerated presidential primaries also shows that Democrats are vastly more optimistic of their chances of returning to the White House than Republicans are confident of holding onto the presidency.

The findings of the poll, conducted among separate samples of Democratic and Republican voters, provide an early sounding about voter favorites who have campaigned extensively in neighboring Iowa, home of the nation's first caucuses Jan. 3.

By joining a host of other states that moved to the so-called Super Tuesday date of Feb. 5, there is a very real chance Illinois voters will play a role in the presidential nominating contest for the first time in years. But the outcomes in Iowa, New Hampshire and other earlier states could affect which candidates Illinois voters ultimately support.

Half of respondents for Obama

Among the 500 likely Democratic voters surveyed Dec. 9 to 13, Obama, a first-term U.S. senator from Illinois, was the choice of 50 percent; Clinton, a senator from New York who was born in Chicago and raised in Park Ridge, followed with 25 percent.

Former U.S. Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina was a distant third with 7 percent support in the poll, while New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, U.S. Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware and U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio each had 2 percent. U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut had less than 1 percent while another 11 percent of those surveyed were undecided.

Both the Democratic and Republican surveys have an error margin of 4.4 percentage points.

Because of the arcane method in which Democrats award national nominating delegates, the poll results indicate that Clinton's decision to keep Illinois in play and not cede it to Obama could pay at least some modest dividends. Delegates are selected based on how well a candidate does in each of the state's 19 congressional districts.

Obama, who previously represented Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in the state Senate for nearly eight years until his U.S. Senate win in 2004, had been expected to be a favorite among Illinois Democrats. The Democratic leadership in Illinois government advanced the state's traditional mid-March primary date as a way to help deliver a sizable number of convention delegates to Obama.

But the poll revealed that some Obama backers lack confidence that their candidate will be able to go the distance.

When Democratic voters were asked, regardless of their personal choice for president, which candidate would have the best chance of defeating a Republican next November, 39 percent said Clinton and 37 percent said Obama. Among those believing the New York senator and former first lady would win out were a quarter of those who said they are backing Obama. In contrast, only 7 percent of those backing Clinton said they thought Obama was the most electable Democrat.

By far, Obama scored the most favorable ratings among the top-tier Democratic presidential contenders. Fully 79 percent of Democratic voters had a favorable impression of Obama, while 63 percent thought favorably of Clinton and 48 percent had a good opinion of Edwards. Clinton had the highest unfavorable rating -- 20 percent -- in contrast to only 7 percent for Obama.

Obama, seeking to become the first African-American to win the party nomination and presidency, receives his strongest support among black voters: 70 percent for the Illinois senator compared with 17 percent for Clinton. Among white voters, Obama has a 42 percent to 29 percent advantage over Clinton.

Clinton closes gap with women

But the poll found support for Obama compared to Clinton narrows considerably among white women, where he leads 41 percent to 34 percent. The two were virtually even among white voters in the suburban collar counties and Downstate.

When Democratic voters were asked which candidate is more knowledgeable and has a better grasp on the issues, 37 percent said Clinton and 33 percent said Obama, at best a narrow advantage for Clinton given her effort to portray herself as the more experienced candidate. When voters were asked which candidate would be a better agent for change in Washington, Obama was ranked significantly ahead of Clinton, 50 percent to 24 percent.

Reflecting the optimism of Democrats heading into the election year, 82 percent said they viewed the party's chances of retaking the White House after eight years as very good to excellent. Republicans were much

more pessimistic. Among GOP voters, only 45 percent viewed their chances of holding onto the presidency as very good to excellent.

Though the early primary date was set by Democrats to help Obama, the state is likely to see an intense Republican presidential campaign, particularly if the candidate field remains unsettled.

Several of the major Republican contenders have established field operations in the state and have attracted high-profile backing of prominent GOP leaders in a state that has become increasingly Democratic. Among the most regular visitors to the state has been Giuliani, who is counting on Illinois and other large Feb. 5 states where conservatives do not overwhelmingly dominate the primary and caucus system as they do in most earlier states.

The survey of 500 likely Republican voters, who were polled Dec. 9 to 13, found Giuliani with the support of 23 percent, Huckabee with 21 percent, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney with 14 percent, U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona with 12 percent and former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee with 11 percent. The poll also found U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas with 3 percent and U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado with 1 percent. Other candidates had 1 percent backing while 14 percent of those polled were undecided.

Still, 42 percent of Republicans said that regardless of their own preference for president, they believed Giuliani had the best chance of winning the White House, including 60 percent of Romney backers and 50 percent of Huckabee supporters. Only 14 percent said they believed Huckabee had the best chance to win and 12 percent said they believed Romney was the GOP's best shot. Only 6 percent picked McCain, and only 3 percent said Thompson would have the best chance.

Giuliani, a social moderate who has campaigned on a theme of national security and combating terrorism, has his biggest base of support in the suburban collar counties, where he is backed by 30 percent of the GOP voters, as well as a quarter of Cook County Republicans. Huckabee's biggest backing comes from a quarter of Downstate voters and one-fifth of collar county Republicans.

Moderates back Giuliani

Three in 10 voters who describe themselves as moderates are backing Giuliani while 30 percent of those who call themselves very conservative are supporting Huckabee. Giuliani holds a 31 percent support rating from voters younger than 50 compared with 18 percent for Huckabee. Among voters older than 50, a consistent voting bloc, support is widely dispersed among the field.

When asked which Republican has a better understanding and knowledge of the issues, Giuliani tops the GOP list with 23 percent, compared with 16 percent for McCain, 14 percent for Romney, 11 percent for Huckabee and 8 percent for Thompson.

When asked if there is a GOP candidate who is too extreme on the issues and out of step with average Republican voters, Giuliani finished second at 14 percent behind the 17 percent who named Paul, a candidate with libertarian stylings who has relied on support gained through the Internet among people dissatisfied with politics.

A quarter of Thompson supporters and about one in five McCain and Huckabee backers who were polled said they believed Giuliani is too extreme for the party faithful.

Republican support has been fluid largely because of the belief that Republicans are dissatisfied with the

quality of choices for president. Only 20 percent of Republicans said they were "very satisfied" with their field of candidates, compared with 45 percent of Democrats.

Despite months of national polls showing low ratings for President Bush, particularly over the issues of the progress of the Iraq War and the state of the economy, 63 percent of Illinois Republicans approve of the job he is doing. At least 70 percent of Huckabee, Romney and Thompson voters give Bush high approval ratings, while the president receives the highest disapproval rating -- 38 percent -- from supporters of McCain, the man Bush defeated in the race for the Republican nomination nearly eight years ago.

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