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McCain surges, Clinton sails

By DAVE DAVIES
Philadelphia Daily News

daviesd@phillynews.com 215-854-2595

PENNSYLVANIA IS Clinton country among Democrats and McCainville among Republicans, and it's a state where voters worry about the economy and yearn for national health-care reform.

Those are the findings of the latest *Daily News/Keystone* Poll, conducted after wins by U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton and John McCain in the New Hampshire primary last week.

The poll, by the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin & Marshall College, found Clinton leading U.S. Sen. Barack Obama by a margin of 40 percent to 20 percent, with former U.S. Sen. John Edwards at 11 percent.

On the Republican side, McCain has overtaken former front-runner Rudy Giuliani, leading the former New York mayor 30 percent to 14 percent, with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee in third at 12 percent.

"But remember, there are plenty of undecideds, and nearly three out of five Democrats who have a preference say they could still change their minds," said poll director G. Terry Madonna. "So this thing could change on a dime."

Madonna noted that McCain's rise and Giuliani's fall mostly reflects national trends in the GOP, since the candidates haven't been buying ads or campaigning in Pennsylvania.

Among the findings on key issues:

* Pennsylvanians want health-care reform, as 69 percent strongly or somewhat favor the U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all its

citizens.

"This is a trend we've seen developing," Madonna said. "We've seen employers dropping coverage, people coping with higher co-pays, and more people living without any insurance."

* The economy has replaced the war in Iraq as the top issue among both Republicans and Democrats. A majority, 67 percent, said the economy is doing "not too well" or "not well at all," the survey found.

"I think economic populism is going to play very well in Pennsylvania this year," Madonna said. "It's beginning to remind me of an election like 1992. When the economy goes bad, Pennsylvanians have looked to the government for help."

* Voters are divided on Iraq with 51 percent saying the military effort is going fairly well or very well, and the same number saying the U.S. should keep the same number of troops in Iraq until the situation stabilizes. Forty-four percent believe that troops should begin to come home immediately.

"Pennsylvanians are closely divided on the war, but I think this suggests a strong sentiment that the surge is working," Madonna said.

* On immigration, 84 percent of voters said the country needs to do more to regulate it.

The Pennsylvania presidential primary has had little impact in recent years, since it falls far later than many other states'. But Madonna said there's a chance the April 22 balloting could matter this time, bringing candidates and political ads in abundance.

"It could happen, especially on the Republican side," Madonna said. "If Clinton and Obama run a two-candidate Democratic race, it's likely one will be getting near a majority of convention delegates before Pennsylvania votes, though if Edwards hangs in and keeps getting votes, it could be interesting.

"If we have several Republican candidates getting between 20 and 30 percent of the delegates, we could reach Pennsylvania and find that this one counts," Madonna said.

While Clinton holds a commanding lead over Obama in the volatile horse race, her negative rating remains the highest of the Democratic pack, with 40 percent viewing her favorably and 43 percent of voters unfavorably.

By contrast, 41 percent of those polled viewed Obama favorably and only 27 percent viewed him unfavorably.

Still, Clinton continues to run strong in Philadelphia and its suburbs, Madonna said.

On the Republican side, McCain's favorability ratings have surged dramatically since the last Keystone Poll in August, while former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson and Giuliani have seen their negative ratings rise sharply.

Romney's unfavorable rating rose from 20 to 34 percent, Thompson's from 16 to 33 percent, and Giuliani's from 32 to 43 percent.

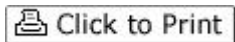
The poll suggests more of Edwards' support comes from personal likability than any other Democrat, while Huckabee holds that distinction among Republicans.

You can view the entire poll at

<http://go.philly.com/2008poll>. *

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