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## PRESIDENTIAL RACE: Nevadans give McCain edge

### But undecided voters hold key to election

By MOLLY BALL  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Nevada voters favor Republican John McCain over Democrat Barack Obama, but a sizable number who plan to vote remain undecided about the presidential race, according to a new Review-Journal poll.

As both parties aim to put the diverse and growing swing state into play, McCain has taken the lead by a margin of 46 percent to Obama's 39 percent, with 15 percent undecided, according to the poll.

The poll, conducted in concert with other news organizations in six Western states, found McCain enjoying an edge throughout his home region.

Taken as a whole, voters in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming favored McCain, 48 percent to 39 percent, with 13 percent undecided. McCain led in every state except Colorado.

The overall regional poll average carries a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points, while individual state polls carry a margin of error of 5 percentage points in either direction. Four hundred likely voters were surveyed in each state by telephone Aug. 13-15.

"McCain has widened his lead and seems to have gained a bit of an upper hand in Nevada," said Brad Coker, managing partner of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc., the Washington, D.C.-based firm that conducted the poll for the Review-Journal, the Denver Post and the Salt Lake Tribune.

"It's still early and there's a lot that is going to happen (before the election in November), but coming out of the gate McCain is in the lead."

A Review-Journal poll in June found a closer result, with McCain up 44 percent to 42 percent and 14 percent undecided, a statistical tie that most other polls in the state, considered an electoral toss-up, have reflected.

Both campaigns have targeted Nevada as a key state with television ads and campaign organizing.

In the wider Western region, Democrats see political opportunity in changing demographics, increasing urbanization, and the strain of frontier-style, independent thinking that runs through the Intermountain West.

January's Nevada presidential caucuses and this week's Democratic National Convention in Denver were planned by the Democratic Party as part of an effort to make inroads in the West.

"The road to the presidency is through the West," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said in a conference call last week.

Republicans maintain that the Southwest's historic conservatism continues to hold sway and that McCain, a longtime senator from Arizona, has an edge in the part of the country he calls home. Southwest residents may see Illinois-based Obama as an outsider.

The six-state poll is skewed somewhat by the inclusion of Utah and Wyoming, two heavily Republican states that neither campaign considers up for grabs. However, since the poll is weighted to reflect the states' respective populations, tiny Wyoming, the least populated state in the nation, had little effect on the overall numbers, Coker said.

Most analysts do not consider Arizona a likely pickup for Obama either. But Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico all are seen as swing states.

"Nevada and New Mexico are the two Western states people thought would be most likely to go from red to blue, but here it looks like Nevada's actually less likely than Colorado," Coker noted.

The poll was taken at a time when McCain appeared to gain steam nationally and Obama appeared to falter. McCain may have benefited from the crisis in the Republic of Georgia, which threw a spotlight on his foreign-policy experience, and from ads portraying Obama as an empty "celebrity," Coker said.

In Nevada, 48 percent of poll respondents said they viewed McCain favorably, while just 25 percent saw him unfavorably.

Obama was viewed favorably by 43 percent and unfavorably by 37 percent.

"What struck me is that Obama's negatives are much higher than McCain's," Coker said. "Obama maybe has suffered a bit of overexposure lately, and that shift dovetails pretty closely with the McCain lead."

In the regional poll, McCain had an advantage among men, 51 percent to 35 percent, and edged Obama among women, 45 percent to 43 percent.

McCain did substantially better within his own party than Obama did with his: 81 percent of Republicans favored McCain and just 8 percent supported Obama.

Obama had the support of 75 percent of Democrats, 13 percent of whom said they would vote for McCain.

Among independents, the two candidates were tied at 41 percent, with 18 percent of that group still on the fence.

Hispanic voters, who are being heavily courted by both candidates, favor Obama by a more than 2-to-1 margin, 64 percent to 25 percent.

In Nevada, McCain did even better with Democrats, getting 17 percent of their vote to Obama's 69 percent.

That was a possible hangover from the battle for the Democratic nomination between Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., who won Nevada's January caucuses and recently came to the state to campaign for her former rival.

Obama had a lead among Nevada independent voters, 40 percent to 34 percent, with 26 percent still undecided.

The two candidates were surprisingly close in Clark County, the state's Democratic bastion and home to 70 percent of Nevada's population. Obama had 43 percent of the vote to McCain's 42 percent in the county that includes the Las Vegas metropolitan area.

In the rest of the state, McCain led, 53 percent to 32 percent.

McCain spokesman Rick Gorka called the poll "encouraging news" but said he expected Nevada to remain competitive. McCain's apparent strength throughout the West "comes down to Senator McCain being a Western senator. He understands the issues. He has lived the issues every day of his life."

Obama spokeswoman Kirsten Searer said the Democrat's campaign remains confident Nevada and the West are open to his message.

"We're going to continue talking to voters about Senator Obama's message of change in Washington, and the evidence we've seen is that Nevadans are responding to it," she said.

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