

Poll: Obama, McCain lead in Va.

Both enjoy sizable leads over rivals as primary approaches Tuesday

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Barack Obama and John McCain may be cruising toward blowout wins in Virginia's presidential primary Tuesday.

Among the Democrats, the poll conducted for the Richmond Times-Dispatch and other Virginia newspapers shows Obama leading Hillary Rodham Clinton 53 percent to 37 percent.

Among the Republicans McCain is up 55 percent to 27 percent, over his remaining major rival, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. With 5 percent, Texas Rep. Ron Paul is a distant third.

McCain has broad appeal within the GOP, even outpolling Huckabee among religious conservatives -- a key voter bloc for Huckabee. McCain leads Huckabee 43 percent to 41 percent among self-described evangelical Christians. The survey shows Obama lifted by massive support among African-Americans. Further, his strength is concentrated in the urban-suburban crescent that spans from outside Washington to Virginia Beach and dominates the state's politics.

The margin of error is 5 percentage points. The survey was conducted Thursday and Friday by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. of Washington.

It is based on phone interviews with 800 likely voters -- 400 Democrats and 400 Republicans.

The Virginia contest, along with primaries in neighboring Maryland and Washington, could reshape the close and hard-fought Democratic campaign, while underscoring Arizona senator McCain's status as the presumed Republican nominee.

The Virginia primary also is a test of the pulling power of Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, a national co-chairman of the Obama campaign. Kaine was the first governor to endorse the Illinois senator outside his home state.

Though Virginia has not supported a Democrat for president since 1964, both parties believe the state could be in play this year because of steady statewide gains by Democrats since 2001.

The Times-Dispatch Poll did not test hypothetical match-ups for the fall election.

Clinton, a senator from New York, is leading among white voters. She is the preference of voters who favor experience and are concerned about the economy and health care, while Obama is viewed by most as a symbol of change.

McCain, who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, also is strong among military voters, supported by six in 10.

A presumed Virginia win for McCain would be a dramatic contrast with 2000, when his previous bid for president was stopped here by George W. Bush.

Heading into Virginia that year, McCain had attacked Pat Robertson and the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the state's nationally prominent conservative religious leaders, as agents of intolerance.

In the poll, Huckabee is the pick of the most conservative voters. Forty-one percent are siding with him. Many of these voters are concentrated in the rural south and west -- regions where the former Arkansas governor is only even with McCain.

A closer look at the poll shows:

- Men prefer Obama to Clinton, 59 percent to 32 percent. He also leads with women, 49 percent to 41 percent.

On the Republican side, McCain is pulling 58 percent of male voters and 52 percent of female voters.

- Blacks support Obama over Clinton, 82 percent to 9 percent.
- Obama leads in all regions of the state, except the rural south and west, where Clinton has a negligible advantage. His strongest region, at 62 percent, is Hampton Roads, which has a sizable African-American population.

McCain is ahead in all areas, with a high of 69 percent in Northern Virginia, except for the south and west, where he and Huckabee are tied at 42 percent each.

- The top issues, in order, for Democrats are the economy and jobs, health care, Iraq, national security and terrorism, the environment and energy, and racial progress.

Republicans put national security first, followed by the economy and jobs, moral and family issues, immigration, taxes and government spending and Iraq.

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