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Clinton, McCain lead in bellwether Super Tuesday states

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WASHINGTON — Republican John McCain leads in all four corners of the country heading into a rush of primaries on Tuesday, while Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were locked in a close struggle for delegates coast to coast, according to a new series of McClatchy-MSNBC polls.

McCain led challengers Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee in California in the West, Missouri in the Midwest, Georgia in the South, and New Jersey in the East — a regional cross-section of the 21 states voting Tuesday for the Republican nomination.

With many Republican contests winner-take-all delegate bonanzas, the surveys suggest that McCain could emerge from Tuesday's vote with a commanding lead for the Republican nomination.

Clinton had the edge in three regional samplings — in Arizona and California in the West, Missouri in the Midwest, and New Jersey in the East.

But Obama was close in most of those — and led in the Southern state of Georgia.

That regional taste of the 22 Democratic contests on Tuesday suggests that the two will carve up the country, each emerging with a big bloc of delegates and the nomination far from clear. Second-place finishers win delegates in Democratic primaries.

And in each of these regional bellwether states, at least 10 percent of Democratic voters remained undecided.

"For the Republicans, McCain is clearly the frontrunner. He's ahead in every state," said Brad Coker, the managing partner of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, which conducted the nine polls.

"For the Democrats, she's ahead everywhere except Georgia. But the leads aren't so big that it's a slam dunk."

Indeed, as primaries have shown throughout this volatile year, the actual vote can differ greatly from polls as voters change their minds or surge to the vote in numbers that overwhelm expectations.

These polls, for example, assume a larger than usual turnout. But if young people surge to vote in record numbers as they did in Iowa or South Carolina, that could produce a much larger vote for Obama.

"There's a cap on older voters," said Coker. "Where the meter shifts is with younger voters, depending on how they turn out. The more younger voters Obama can bring out, the better he does."

Another key dynamic heading into Tuesday's showdown is the way voters have shifted their priorities.

Among Republicans, for example, the economy has risen as an issue and immigration has faded in every state. That's good news for McCain, who edges out Romney among voters who say the economy is the most important issue, but trails among voters who say immigration is.

On the Democratic side, the economy also has risen as the top concern, while Iraq has dropped down the priority list. That helps Clinton, who leads among pocketbook voters in four out of five states, but trails along Iraq voters in four out of five states.

Here are breakdowns of races in key states:

CALIFORNIA REPUBLICANS

McCain, 40 percent; Romney, 31 percent; Huckabee, 13 percent; Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, 3 percent; undecided, 11 percent.

McCain is strongest in Northern California, the more moderate to liberal part of the state, but he also leads in central California.

He has an edge among economy voters and leads solidly among national security voters. He also leads among evangelical voters.

Romney's strongest in southern California, where he splits support with McCain. "There's still some old-time conservatives in Orange County," said Coker. "Romney may not do too bad there. He will win some Congressional districts."

View the [full poll data for California Republicans](#) (.pdf format).

GEORGIA REPUBLICANS

McCain, 33 percent; Romney, 27 percent; Huckabee, 18 percent; Paul, 4 percent; undecided, 17 percent.

McCain's base is in rural and small-town Georgia, particularly among military retirees.

Romney has an edge in metropolitan Atlanta, particularly the fast-growing suburbs filled with migrating northerners. "His corporate background has a lot of appeal there. And as Huckabee has fallen off there, Romney has come into play in Georgia," said Coker. "If Romney's going to break through, Georgia might be the place."

View the [full poll data for Georgia Republicans](#) (.pdf format).

MISSOURI REPUBLICANS

McCain, 37 percent; Huckabee, 27 percent; Romney, 24 percent; Paul, 1 percent; undecided, 11 percent.

McCain has a solid lead among security and economy voters, and splits the evangelical vote with Huckabee.

Moral and family issues top the agenda for Republican primary voters here — the only one where they did — and those voters go for Huckabee by a big margin.

"Huckabee is a factor here," said Coker. "He's the former governor of a state that's geographically and politically similar. Southwest Missouri and northeast Arkansas are very similar." That helps

McCain, Coker said, because "Huckabee will hold Romney's vote down."

View the [full poll data for Missouri Republicans](#) (.pdf format).

NEW JERSEY REPUBLICANS

McCain, 46 percent; Romney, 31 percent; Huckabee, 5 percent; Paul, 4 percent; undecided, 12 percent.

McCain leads in every demographic group, even among the one in five who call themselves evangelicals.

The one hope for Romney here is that half of Huckabee's supporters say they still could change their minds.

View the [full poll data for New Jersey Republicans](#) (.pdf format).

ARIZONA DEMOCRATS

Clinton, 43 percent; Obama, 41 percent; undecided, 13 percent.

Clinton leads narrowly among whites, but this is the one state polled where Obama enjoys a solid lead among Hispanics, 53-37 percent.

Coker suggested one reason was that Arizona Hispanics are more ingrained in the suburban Phoenix and suburban Tucson culture than counterparts in California. "They've been there longer. They vote very differently than newer Hispanics," he said. "They don't see the black-brown conflict in the same context."

View the [full poll data for Arizona Democrats](#) (.pdf format).

CALIFORNIA DEMOCRATS

Clinton, 45 percent; Obama, 36 percent; undecided, 16 percent.

Here they split the white vote. He leads better than 4-1 among blacks, and she leads 4-1 among Hispanics. There are more Hispanics than blacks, so she has the edge.

"He'll get some Chablis-sipping liberals up north, and blacks down south," Coker said. "Her trump card is the Hispanic vote."

Wildcard: California had the highest number of undecided voters — 16 percent — of any state.

View the [full poll data for California Democrats](#) (.pdf format).

GEORGIA DEMOCRATS

Obama, 47 percent; Clinton, 41 percent; undecided, 10 percent.

Obama leads in metro Atlanta and has a nearly 3-1 lead among black voters. African-Americans could make up about 40 percent of the vote.

Obama also leads among independents, while splitting Democrats with Clinton.

Her strength is in rural and small-town Georgia, and among whites, where she enjoys a 54-31

percent lead.

View the [full poll data for Georgia Democrats](#) (.pdf format).

MISSOURI DEMOCRATS

Clinton, 47 percent; Obama, 41 percent; undecided, 10 percent.

Clinton leads among Democrats and whites, with whom she's up by 17 points.

Obama leads among independents and blacks, with whom he has a 6-1 advantage. Black voters could make up about 13 percent of the statewide vote.

"He does well around St. Louis and Kansas City," Coker said. "She's going to kill him in rural Missouri. There are just not enough blacks there to carry him."

View the [full poll data for Missouri Democrats](#) (.pdf format).

NEW JERSEY DEMOCRATS

Clinton, 46 percent; Obama, 39 percent; undecided, 12 percent.

Clinton leads among whites by 12 points and among Hispanics by a margin of 67-18 percent. He leads among blacks by 73-17 percent.

"She's still a pretty solid favorite in New Jersey," Coker said. "The minority vote in New Jersey keeps him in the picture."

View the [full poll data for New Jersey Democrats](#) (.pdf format).

HOW WE POLL

The McClatchy-MSNBC Poll is a snapshot of voter opinion at the time it was conducted.

It is not a prediction of how people will vote on Election Day.

The Mason-Dixon poll of 400 likely Democratic and Republican primary voters each in California, Georgia, Missouri and New Jersey — and 400 likely Democratic primary voters in Arizona alone — was conducted by telephone Jan. 30-Feb. 1.

Those interviewed were selected by a random variation of telephone numbers from a cross section of telephone exchanges. That means anyone in the state with a phone line had the same odds of being called as anyone else, except for people who use cell phones only. Cell phone numbers are not in the exchanges.

The margin of error was plus or minus 5 percentage points. That means that 95 percent of the time, the correct numbers could be up to 5 percentage points above our poll's percentage point findings, or up to 5 percentage points below them. The other 5 percent of the time, the correct numbers could vary even more.

The sampling margin of error does not include other variables that could affect results, including the way questions are worded or the order in which they are asked.

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