

Posted on Sun, Jan. 06, 2008

Obama tied with Clinton in N.H. poll

BY STEVEN THOMMA

Riding an Iowa crest, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has caught New York Sen. Hillary Clinton in the Democratic race for the New Hampshire primary, while Arizona Sen. John McCain maintains a solid lead in the Republican contest, according to a new McClatchy-MSNBC poll.

Obama now leads Clinton by a margin of 33 percent to 31 percent, thanks to an apparent surge of support the night after he won the Iowa caucuses. Given the poll's margin of error, the numbers amount to a statistical tie. But that still marks a gain for Obama, who has trailed Clinton in New Hampshire for months.

On the Republican side, McCain led the field by 32 percent to 24 percent over former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. There, it was McCain who got a bounce, not Iowa winner Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas who still trails in third place and appeared to get no immediate traction from Iowa.

The new poll is hardly a prediction. If anything, it revealed an electorate in New Hampshire still very much up for grabs.

Its three nights of interviews straddled the Iowa results -- before, during and after -- and could have recorded merely a blip for Obama or the start of a wave. It also came before potentially pivotal debates in New Hampshire Saturday night and Sunday that could swing the Tuesday vote in any direction.

Underscoring the volatility: Three of 10 likely voters in each party said they could still change their minds; nearly one of ten New Hampshire independents said they still hadn't decided in which primary to vote.

But the poll may have picked up the beginning of an Obama rally. Obama trailed Clinton 30 percent to 27 percent the first two nights of the polling, then surged ahead, 39 percent to 32 percent Friday night -- the day after Iowa. The nightly sample of 200 was small, however, and subject to a greater margin of error.

Independents are a key factor in New Hampshire, where they can vote in either primary.

"New Hampshire independents clearly favor Obama on the Democratic side and McCain on the Republican side," said Brad Coker, managing partner for Mason-Dixon Polling and Research, which conducted the poll Jan. 2-4.

"They are, in fact, providing the margins for the two nominal leaders," he added, noting that registered Democrats actually break for Clinton and registered Republicans split almost evenly between McCain and Romney.

The numbers thus far on the Democratic race:

- Obama, 33 percent;
- Clinton, 31 percent;
- Former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, 17 percent;

- Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico, 7 percent.
- Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, 1 percent;
- Other candidates, 3 percent;
- Undecided, 8 percent

Overall, Obama had a solid lead among young voters, independents, those looking for change, and those who rank Iraq or the economy their top concern.

His weakness remained older voters, who preferred Clinton, and those who want experience, who favored either Clinton or Richardson.

The complete numbers on the Republican side:

- McCain, 32 percent;
- Romney, 24 percent;
- Huckabee, 12 percent;
- Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, 9 percent;
- Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, 8 percent;
- Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson, 3 percent;
- Rep. Duncan Hunter of California, 1 percent;
- Former Ambassador Alan Keyes of Maryland, 1 percent;
- Undecided, 10 percent.

On the Republican side, the poll suggests that after Iowa, McCain gained in New Hampshire as Romney and Huckabee failed to advance. In surveys conducted the night after Iowa, McCain, who did not compete in the caucuses, gained six points.

He owes his overall lead to his solid appeal to independents, and to men, those looking for experience and leadership, and those who rank national security, the economy or taxes their top concerns.

Romney lost his longtime lead in Iowa and finished second there despite spending the most money. He has an edge among women, those looking for someone who shares their values and view of the issues, and those who rank illegal immigration their top issue.

Huckabee's lack of traction in New Hampshire may owe to the fact that it has far fewer evangelical Christians than has Iowa. The Baptist preacher has the edge among them over McCain, but they represent only about a quarter of the likely vote, down from 60 percent in Iowa.

Other challenges for the Iowa winner: The same number of New Hampshire voters dislike him as like him, and he gets just 3 percent of the non-evangelical Christian support.

"Not only did Huckabee not get a bounce, but his internal numbers do not look promising," Coker said.

``With his Iowa victory based largely on his narrow appeal to evangelicals, there are signs that he has alienated other elements of the Republican coalition."

The final wild card in New Hampshire is a slice of independents that has not yet decided which party primary to vote in and were not included in the poll -- but which could swell voting by another 8 percentage points.

Among those who would express an early preference, they favored Obama by a margin of 2-1 over Edwards or Clinton, and McCain by a margin of 2-1 over Romney.

"Depending on if these voters actually show up and which ballot they choose to take," said Coker, ``Obama and McCain potentially could add two to three points on to their leads over their closest rivals."

"Before Iowa, both races were essentially even," Coker said. ``In the one night of interviewing after Iowa, Obama and McCain pulled ahead. What we don't know is if this is simply a blip or the beginning of a surge.

``It is possible that by Tuesday these leads are double of what they are now, or that the races have settled back to the tight ones they were a few days ago. When you're surveying in the middle of the moment when things are set in motion, there is really no way to predict how and where they will eventually end up."

NEW HAMPSHIRE VOICES

Marlena Gloff-Straw, Clinton supporter, Chatham, teacher: ``I really admired the effort she put forward as first lady with health care. It was valiant. I'd like to see her efforts on health care go forward."

Jessica Sosnowski, Obama supporter, Windham, homemaker: ``I'm a registered independent and my husband is in the military, in Afghanistan. I can't find myself voting Republican. I think Obama will take the country in a better direction than it's gone the past seven years."

Rita Essig, Edwards supporter, Alton, retired: ``He seems to be down to earth. I'm tired of people promising and never coming through, and I'm hoping Edwards will."

Richard Plante, Romney supporter, E. Wakefield, contractor: ``He wants to do away with a lot of taxes, and he wants to deal with the illegal immigration problem. I'm not sure John McCain would."

Cynthia Shields, McCain supporter, Windham, teacher: ``He's not flip-flopping around, and I don't want somebody running the country who doesn't have the experience to do it."

Donald Bennett, Huckabee supporter, Nelson, retired engineer: ``I like his standing on issues of morality and that kind of thing. He's a little shy on foreign policy but he has good judgment, and he'd listen to people and depend on his Cabinet.