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Detroit News-WXYZ poll

Poll: Obama, McCain locked in tight battle for Michigan

Gordon Trowbridge / Detroit News Washington Bureau

Barack Obama and John McCain are locked in a tight Michigan presidential race, according to a Detroit News-WXYZ Action News poll that illustrates why both camps consider this one of the battleground states that could determine who wins in November.

Obama has the support of 43 percent of likely Michigan voters, to 41 percent for McCain, according to the survey conducted for The News and WXYZ by Lansing's EPIC-MRA. That's well within the survey's 4 percentage point error margin. A potentially decisive 12 percent say they're still undecided, and 5 percent chose third-party candidates Bob Barr or Ralph Nader.

"Just as we thought, it's going to be a close race in Michigan," said David Dulio, a political science professor at Oakland University.

The numbers are an improvement for Obama over EPIC-MRA's last survey, in late May, which found McCain leading by 4 points. It's also a better showing for McCain than in other recent polls: Real Clear Politics, a Website that tracks and averages political polls, shows Obama with a 7.7-point lead in its Michigan polling average.

The telephone survey of 600 likely voters, conducted July 13-16, shows the Michigan electorate views both McCain and Obama favorably. But each candidate has areas of policy, demographic and geographic strength -- and each has significant weaknesses.

- Obama, buoyed by near-universal support from African-Americans, is well ahead in Detroit. He holds a big lead with young voters, and a smaller edge among those who name the economy as their primary concern, and gets better marks as the candidate most likely to bring change.
- McCain leads among white voters, but not by a large enough margin to counter Obama's lead with African-Americans. He is ahead across the state outside of Metro Detroit, especially in northern and western Michigan. McCain gets higher marks as a candidate voters trust, and to handle terrorism and homeland security.

Each candidate gets support from about four of every five voters from his own party -- leaving the race in the hands of the roughly 16 percent of Michigan voters who say they are independents.

McCain holds a slender, 4-point lead among them -- but that's down from a double-digit lead in EPIC-MRA's late May survey.

"I'm just undecided right now," said Maria VanderMolen, 86, of Spring Lake, a lifelong Democrat. Obama, she said, can likely better address the economy, but she said she can't yet commit to Obama.

"He's just come out of nowhere," she said. She worries, she said, "about the way things are coming out about his life. I haven't got one thing specific. I just don't know."

EPIC-MRA pollster Bernie Porn said there is some good news for McCain within the undecided voters, who view the Republican favorably by a significant margin.

Overall, voters look at both men positively: 51 percent have a favorable view of Obama, to 37 percent unfavorable. McCain's positives are even better: 58 percent favorable to 32 percent unfavorable.


"Sen. Obama seems like a decent gentleman, speaking what he truly believes," said Roger Thomas, 50, a computer consultant from Port Huron. "I just disagree with him on too many policy issues."

If each has a positive image, they come by them differently. By a 42-34 margin, voters chose McCain as the candidate they trust more. Nearly two-thirds chose him as the candidate with the "right kind of experience" to be president, and he's more likely to be seen as a strong leader.

But 43 percent see Obama as the candidate who cares about someone like them, to 32 percent for McCain. Fifty-three percent say Obama is more likely to bring "needed change," more than double the number for McCain. And Obama holds a 3-1 lead on the question of who is more likely to inspire people.

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