

## **Poll: Many Alabama Democrats still undecided**

Posted by [cpow](#) January 20, 2008 08:23AM

MONTGOMERY -- Like their Republican counterparts, Alabama Democrats said they're not sure which presidential hopeful they'll select Feb. 5. But with a more settled field than the GOP, they've started to take sides and divide along racial lines.

Thirty-three percent of respondents in a new Press-Register/University of South Alabama poll of likely Democratic primary voters said they had not decided on a candidate.

U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York received 31 percent, while U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois garnered 28 percent. Former U.S. Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina received 8 percent.

The survey, conducted Jan. 7 to Jan. 15, includes responses from 439 Democrats who said they are likely to vote in the upcoming primary. The margin of error is 5 percentage points.

"There's been a lot of stuff going on, and there's no obvious bandwagon for people to get on," said Keith Nicholls, a USA political science professor and director of the USA Polling Group. "The candidates have not been to Alabama to a large extent. And there's a large uncertainty as to who (people will) vote for."

Party primaries will take place Feb. 5, which is also Fat Tuesday. Because of the holiday, voters in Mobile and Baldwin counties will be able to vote either Jan. 30 or Feb. 5 to avoid potential conflicts with the annual Mardi Gras celebration.

The results of the new poll are similar to those from a Press-Register/USA survey in April, when Clinton scored 33 percent, Obama received 25 percent, and Edwards trailed at 12 percent.

Edwards, with strong connections to the state's trial lawyer community, outraised his opponents in Alabama through Sept. 30, according to federal campaign disclosure reports. However, Alabama Democrats began putting more cash into the wallets of Clinton and Obama by the end of the year.

The results of the latest Press-Register/USA survey also suggest a split among white and black voters. Thirty-nine percent of white Democrats favored Clinton, while Obama and Edwards each received 13 percent. Thirty-five percent were undecided.

Obama led among black Democrats, with 49 percent to Clinton's 18 percent. One percent chose Edwards.

Thirty-two percent of black voters were undecided.

David Lanoue, a political science professor at the University of Alabama, said those numbers reflect national trends, which suggest that Obama's name recognition has gradually improved his prospects among black voters.

"(Hillary Clinton) had superior name recognition, and there was the strong support (former President) Clinton had among the African-American community," Lanoue said. "But as Obama became better known, and it was increasingly clear he was a strong and viable candidate, I think his appeal among African-Americans has grown."

U.S. Rep. Artur Davis, D-Birmingham, a state co-chairman of Obama's campaign, said the numbers indicate that the primary in Alabama will be close.

"I still think a lot of white voters in Alabama have not been introduced to Obama, yet," Davis said. "Clinton is a better-known brand than Senator Obama."

Marion Steinfels, communications director for Clinton's Alabama campaign, said the results indicate a competitive race but did not comment directly on the racial demographic numbers.

"We're very confident that Senator Clinton is going to do well," Steinfels said. "I can tell you being on the ground for the past couple of days, there's amazing support for Senator Clinton."

Nicholls agreed the primary will be close.

"It's also possible Hillary and Barack Obama appeal to the same types of liberal Democrats," Nicholls said. "They may have a hard time deciding between them."

The survey results also suggest a gender divide, although there was a significant amount of indecision.

Obama led among likely male Democratic voters with 33 percent to Clinton's 30 percent; 30 percent were undecided. Clinton led among women, 31 percent to 24 percent, with 37 percent undecided.

The Edwards campaign dismissed the results, saying in a prepared statement that voters will decide the election: "On February 5, we are confident that voters will choose the candidate with the backbone to say that we are in a fight for our country and we need to take on the special interests if we are going to have a country that works for hard-working families and the middle class. That candidate is John Edwards."

The Democratic candidates made a handful of appearances in Alabama last year. Clinton and Obama visited Selma in March to participate in commemorations of the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march. Edwards was invited to speak before the state Legislature in the spring, but confusion among leaders in the chamber prevented it.

Clinton visited the Mobile area in May for a private fundraiser.

Obama made several stops in northern Alabama in July, and all three candidates have appeared at fundraisers in the state, but Alabama hasn't seen the deluge of politicians and national media that states such as Iowa and New Hampshire have.

However, the Clinton and Obama campaigns have opened offices and hired personnel to work in Alabama, and the Edwards campaign said it has a grass-roots organization here.

It is not known if any of the candidates will visit Alabama before Feb. 5. The state doesn't have as many delegates as larger states, such as California, that are holding primaries that day.

"On the Democratic side, Alabama will be important, but the candidates are going to have to pick their spots and go after the larger states that have a lot of delegates," Lanoue said. "They'll have organization here, but I wouldn't expect the Democrats to visit."

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