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Poll: Obama leads McCain slightly

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Missouri voters are frightened about the economy, hurting over high gas prices, disillusioned with the war in Iraq and convinced the nation is headed in the wrong direction.

Such a pessimistic view of the country is prompting many of them to turn to Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama.

That's the political picture painted by the latest poll conducted for the Post-Dispatch and KMOV-TV (Channel 4) by Research 2000, a Maryland-based polling firm.

By significant margins, the 800 likely voters polled last week said they trust the expected Democratic presidential nominee more than his Republican rival, John McCain, when it comes to tackling many of the nation's domestic troubles.

A majority gave higher marks to McCain only when it comes to handling the war on terrorism.

Pollster Del Ali says that backdrop largely explains why those polled slightly preferred Obama over McCain, 48 percent to 43 percent. The remaining 9 percent were undecided.

Obama's five-point edge is within the poll's margin of error of 3.5 percentage points for each number. That means similar polls could show results ranging from a two-point lead for McCain to a larger margin for Obama.

But Ali said Republicans should be far more concerned about Obama's lead of 16 percentage points when respondents were asked which man could better handle the economy. Those polled also preferred Obama by similar or larger margins on other domestic matters, including global warming, gas prices and health care.

What McCain has to do, said Ali, is shore up his standing on the domestic front among Missouri voters while convincing them that Obama is "dangerous for the country" when it comes to terrorism and war.

The poll signaled the potential power of that argument: Those polled gave McCain a 19 percentage-point edge when it came to handling terrorism.

Obama has to continue telling voters, "I'm a safe choice," Ali said. "He can't allow himself to be defined by McCain."

The stakes for both men are high in Missouri, a swing state that often signals how the national electorate is leaning.

"Missouri is a state that McCain is supposed to win in November," Ali said. "If McCain can't close the gap on the economy here, he's done nationally. Obama wins Missouri and the presidential election."

Even in regions of the state that lean Republican, such as the Springfield area, McCain failed to get more than 50 percent support among respondents. But voter preferences, and concerns, can change dramatically between July and November.

In July 2004, a similar poll by Research 2000 saw Democrat John Kerry locked in a statistical dead heat with Republican George W. Bush.

But by the fall, subsequent polls showed Bush edging ahead. He carried Missouri comfortably in November 2004.

Among the reasons for the change, said Ali, was a shift in voters' chief concerns from the war and the economy to national security and terrorism.

PERCEPTIONS DIFFER

Fueling Obama's support in Missouri is his substantial edge among women voters. Those polled preferred Obama by double digits over McCain.

In contrast, the men polled leaned slightly toward McCain.

Ali said Obama's strong female following was significantly larger than the traditional preference of women voters for Democratic presidential candidates.

Such support is a strong indication that the gender wounds are healing from Obama's contentious contest with Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who enjoyed a strong female following in her quest to be the first woman president.

Poll respondent Carol Felberbaum, 68, of St. Charles, voted for Clinton in Missouri's Feb. 5 primary. But she's ready to vote for Obama in November, chiefly over concerns about the economy. "When you have the brightest minds saying we haven't hit bottom yet, that's scary," Felberbaum said.

Jan Kliethermes, a retired teacher in Jefferson City, supported Obama in February and continues to support him because of his opposition to the Iraq War. Recalling her days as a playground overseer, Kliethermes also agrees with Obama's call for more international dialogue.

"I like the idea that he will talk to anybody, especially Iran," she said. "When you had an argument on the playground, first you talked."

Poll participants who support McCain place greater importance on security issues.

"Homeland security, that's dead on," said Jeff Ausmus, a radio producer in Columbia, Mo. Ausmus noted that McCain wasn't his first choice; he voted for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in the primary.

But compared with Obama, McCain is "more seasoned," Ausmus said. "He'll follow the Bush doctrine of being on the offensive. I would prefer we follow the terrorists and fight them over there, than over here."

Gene Kemna, who helps run a family trucking business in Jefferson City, prefers McCain because of their shared political philosophy. "It's mainly the liberal versus conservative question," Kemna said. While "not terribly enthusiastic" about McCain, Kemna is deeply concerned about what he sees as Obama's "real lack of experience and real liberal voting record."

But Kemna also said neither candidate is addressing problems he believes have led to rising gas prices, the loss of American jobs and the fall of the dollar.

"I'm really quite concerned about the transfer of wealth out of our country," Kemna said. "I have little confidence that either one will do what it takes."

AGE, RACE MATTER

The poll echoed recent national surveys that suggest McCain's age is as big a concern among voters as Obama's race. Roughly a third of the Missourians polled said age could be significant in swaying votes — about the same ratio who said a candidate's race was important. Sixty-four percent of the respondents said the country was ready to elect an African-American as president; 18 percent said it was not.

But religion could wield even more power. Almost half — 42 percent — said that faith will be "important" or "very important" to voters as they weigh the two

candidates.

That helps explain why Obama has made a point of speaking to religious groups, as he did recently in St. Louis before a national conference of the African Methodist Episcopal church.

His religious addresses also may be aimed at dispelling the continued misperception among some voters that Obama is Muslim (he's Christian). More than a quarter of the Missourians polled last week said either they weren't sure of Obama's religion (18 percent) or they thought he was Muslim (9 percent).

In McCain's case, 83 percent of those polled ascribed him to various Christian denominations (he's Episcopalian).

Overall the poll showed voters have starkly different perceptions of the country depending on their party affiliation.

The Republicans polled were much more optimistic about the war in Iraq (67 percent support it), compared with only 8 percent of Democrats and a quarter of independents. Less than half of the Republicans polled want to see U.S. troops withdrawn. But almost three-quarters of independents, and 96 percent of Democrats, want at least some troops to return home.

On the economy, Republican poll participants overwhelmingly said it's stable or improving (67 percent). Fifty-six percent of Democrats and 45 percent of independents said they believe the economy will deteriorate.

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