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Your picks: Hillary, Rudy

Sunday, January 13, 2008

BY HERB JACKSON

New Yorkers Hillary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani remain the top choices for president in New Jersey, and most voters do not expect to change their minds before the Feb. 5 primary, a poll by The Record found.

Supporters of other candidates dismissed the results, saying primaries and caucuses in other states this month would make New Jersey competitive.

Clinton led fellow Sen. Barack Obama 48 percent to 23 percent, with former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards at 11 percent, in the poll of 400 likely Democratic voters taken Wednesday and Thursday. Undecided voters made up 13 percent of those surveyed.

The Republican field was closer, a parallel survey of 400 likely voters found.

Former New York City Mayor Giuliani led Arizona Sen. John McCain 34 percent to 18 percent, with former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney at 11 percent and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Texas Rep. Ron Paul at 8 percent each. Some 17 percent of Republicans were undecided.

Both surveys have a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

Given the dominance of the New York media market on New Jersey's densely populated northern section, pundits were not surprised that Clinton and Giuliani led all independent polls of primary voters in the state conducted during 2007. A poll by Quinnipiac University in mid-December had Clinton leading Obama 51 percent to 17 percent and Giuliani leading McCain 38 percent to 12 percent.

But no surveys had been published since Obama and Huckabee won the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3 and Clinton and McCain captured New Hampshire last week. Obama also held a rally in Jersey City on Wednesday that drew an overflow crowd at St. Peter's College.

Overall, The Record's poll found 73 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Republicans said they were not likely to change their minds before the primary. More Obama voters than Clinton voters said they could change, but the poll also found that in recent weeks more voters had switched from Clinton than from Obama.

"My take is Democrats want to vote for him but they want to be absolutely sure he can win," said pollster Del Ali of Rockville,

Md.-based Research 2000, who conducted The Record Poll. "Those who say they're likely to change could say the heck with him. He's got to keep everything he's got and build from there."

Clinton had the support of 54 percent of female Democrats in New Jersey, and 42 percent of men.

"It's great not only to see the depth of her support but the commitment of her support and we're going to be working to build on that," said Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., a national co-chairman for Clinton who was campaigning for her among Latino voters in Nevada this weekend.

Menendez said Clinton supporters would be holding rallies in Hudson and Passaic counties in coming days.

"We're going to push hard," Menendez said. "We're taking nothing for granted."

Obama supporter Loretta Weinberg, a state senator from Teaneck, said she always knew it would be an uphill fight, but she was not deterred by voters saying they were set in their views.

"Many times I said I wouldn't change my mind and ended up doing it," Weinberg said. "I believe Senator Obama is just getting started in New Jersey."

Supporters of McCain and Romney sounded a similar theme.

"The New Jersey numbers for Feb. 5 are largely irrelevant," said Romney supporter Joseph Kyrillos, a state senator from Monmouth County and former state Republican chairman. "Between now and then will be contests in Michigan, South Carolina, Nevada and Florida. The numbers will undoubtedly change as the days of January unfold."

McCain supporter Bill Baroni, a state senator from Mercer County, said that unlike campaigns for a state office where people often make a firm choice for senator or governor, presidential primaries are volatile and voters in one state influence those in another.

"In state after state, Senator McCain's momentum is palpable and we're seeing that in New Jersey as well. There's been a dramatic increase in e-mails and phone calls from people who want to become involved. We're very fortunate," Baroni said.

The McCain organization is reaching out not only to Republicans but to those, especially veterans, who have not voted in primaries before, Baroni said. In New Jersey, independent voters can declare their party preference on primary day and vote in the primary.

Ali, The Record pollster, said it was significant Giuliani maintains a lead after largely avoiding Iowa and New Hampshire. Instead he chose to focus on the Florida primary Jan. 29 and the Super Tuesday voting on Feb. 5, when New Jersey and 22 other states will hold primaries and caucuses.

"The Giuliani campaign can look at the numbers and say, 'This proves our point that we don't have to compete in Iowa and New Hampshire, our strategy of focusing on Super Tuesday works,' " Ali said.

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