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Star/WTHR Poll: Obama edges Clinton

Officials in both camps agree: The race is a toss-up that will remain hotly competitive

By Mary Beth Schneider

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Sen. Barack Obama holds a narrow lead over Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton in Indiana, with the outcome of the May 6 primary likely in the hands of a large number of undecided voters, according to a new Indianapolis Star-WTHR poll.

The poll showed that Obama -- helped in particular by strong backing from black voters -- is leading Clinton 41 percent to 38 percent among likely Democratic primary voters. But given the poll's margin of error of plus or minus 4.2 percentage points, this race is either candidate's to win or lose.

That's especially true because 21 percent of the respondents remain unsure of how they'll vote -- a high number of undecided voters for an election less than two weeks away.

The poll, taken Sunday through Wednesday by Selzer & Co. of Des Moines, Iowa, showed that Obama has one big additional edge over Clinton: He does better against the presumptive Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., than she does.

Among Hoosiers who said they would vote in the general election -- a statewide sample of voters with a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points -- Obama beat McCain 49 percent to 41 percent. Clinton broke even with McCain, with both backed by 46 percent of those polled.

And, by 49 percent to 35 percent, Democratic primary voters said Obama is the candidate best able to win in the general election.

Robert Gibbs, national communications director for the Obama campaign, said the poll "points to a primary that we believe will be very close and very competitive."

But, he said, "the numbers in the general election show Barack Obama's unique ability to change the political map and bring people participating for the first time, or for the first time in a long time, into the election this year."

Joe Hogsett, co-chairman of Clinton's campaign in Indiana, said this and other polls show "this is a toss-up race that is going to be very hotly contested and hard-fought."

He argued, though, that Clinton's win in Pennsylvania on Tuesday has changed the momentum and that the full impact of that win hadn't sunk in when the poll was taken.

Jeff Sadosky, regional communications director for McCain's campaign, said it's clear people are looking for a candidate who can deliver change.

"The question is which candidate has the toughest credibility and experience to actually accomplish what is necessary for our country's future," Sadosky said. "We're confident John McCain will be that choice come November."

One reason for McCain's showing is that Hoosiers are unhappy about the direction the nation has gone after eight years of a Republican in the White House. Fourteen percent of those polled thought the nation is headed in the right direction; 79 percent felt things have gotten off on the wrong track.

Pollster J. Ann Selzer said McCain's lack of strength also may reflect that he "doesn't have a consistent track record on the issues conservatives care most about" and may not be a good fit for conservative Republicans in Indiana.

But, Selzer said, it's also a reflection of the intense interest right now in the long and unsettled Democratic race.

Indiana has "become the shootout at the OK Corral," Selzer said.

The poll found that Obama, the son of a white woman from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, is winning the support of black voters 86 percent to 4 percent.

"Turnout in the black community will hand Obama a victory," Selzer said. "If they fail to show up, that helps Clinton."

Obama's other strengths: If you're young, urban, better educated and better paid, chances are you're voting for him.

The poll found that voters age 18 to 35 favor Obama over Clinton 48 percent to 34 percent, while the oldest voters, age 55 and older, prefer Clinton 43 percent to 32 percent.

Obama is winning urban and suburban voters, 47 percent to 33 percent, while Clinton wins the rural areas by more than 2-to-1: 55 percent to 20 percent.

Clinton is doing well among white women, who back her 48 percent to 29 percent. Among all women, though, Obama is slightly edging her out 41 percent to 40 percent.

Among voters who back Obama, 6 percent said it's because they don't believe the nation is ready for a female president. Among those supporting Clinton, 7 percent said it's because they don't believe the nation is ready for a black president.

Donna Lowhorn, a 58-year-old Indianapolis resident, said she's supporting Obama because she sees him as an enthusiastic, fresh force in politics who doesn't owe favors and might be able to accomplish the changes she thinks are necessary.

But, she added, she's also concerned that the nation is not ready to accept a woman as president.

"Honestly, I don't think she could beat McCain," Lowhorn said. "We'd just have Bush warmed over."

Sharon Jacobs, a 58-year-old retired foundry worker from Auburn, is supporting Clinton.

"To be honest, it's because I liked Bill Clinton as president. I figure two heads are better than one," she said.

But she said she's also worried that "if Obama gets in there, the blacks will kind of try to take over." The fact that that thought entered her head "scares me," Jacobs said. She doesn't want to discriminate, she said, but added: "It's there."

Tom Cory, a 33-year-old Greenwood resident involved in video production, said he's backing Obama, in part because he isn't a Clinton.

"I don't believe in revolving monarchies," he said. "Since the 1980s, we have had a Bush or a Clinton in the White House. That needs to change."

Besides, he said, "I like Barack Obama. He just seems a little more down-to-earth."

That's not what Laurel Marocco, a 32-year-old unemployed construction worker from Logansport, sees in Obama.

"He's too smug," Marocco said. "I'm not sure what they mean by the whole elitist thing, but I think he's snobbish."
