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Minnesota Poll: Clinton has strong lead, but GOP race is bunched up

Minnesotans are backing the presidential front-runners, but they are still warm to Sen. John McCain's troubled candidacy.

By [Bob Von Sternberg](#), Star Tribune

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By more than 2 to 1, Minnesota Democrats overwhelmingly prefer Hillary Rodham Clinton for their party's 2008 presidential nomination, according to a new Star Tribune Minnesota Poll.

But among the state's Republicans, who will host next year's GOP national convention, the presidential race remains close and far from decided as it heads into a wild three-month sprint leading to the nation's first caucuses and primaries.

The unpopular war in Iraq remains the most pressing issue in presidential politics for Minnesotans, especially Democrats, but the economy and health care also are on their minds. For Republicans, but not Democrats, immigration concerns will figure prominently in the race.

Among Democrats, Clinton has 47 percent support.

Clinton's 47 percent number is comparable to recent national polls that have shown her widening her lead over her closest rival, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama. In Minnesota, Obama was supported by 22 percent of Democrats. Former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards is in third place, with 16 percent support.

Of the GOP's candidates, the poll found that Arizona Sen. John McCain shows surprising strength in Minnesota that he no longer enjoys elsewhere, even though he has rebounded slightly in some early voting states.

And McCain's resilience in the state is accompanied by weakness on the part of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who the poll shows is lagging far behind McCain, former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the national front-runner.

And, as is the case nationally, all of the other candidates in both parties trail the front-runners distantly.

The poll interviewed 802 Minnesotans ages 18 and older Sept. 18-23. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 9 percentage points among Republicans and 8 percentage points among Democrats.

The results in Minnesota at this stage, four months before both parties hold precinct caucuses, should be taken with something of a grain of salt, said Dan Hofrenning, chairman of the Political Science Department at St. Olaf College. "It's still pretty early, and there hasn't been much campaign action from anyone on the radar screen here," he said.

Hofrenning also noted that there's no way to know how well a poll sampling the state's entire adult population reflects the views of those who will attend party caucuses Feb. 5. But it provides a snapshot of public sentiment in a race that has been largely conducted beyond the state's borders and shows which issues may resonate among Minnesotans during the general-election campaign next year.

On issues, a partisan divide

Minnesotans ranked the war in Iraq as the most important issue in their choice for president, but only barely, with the economy ranking second and health care third.

Kathryn Pearson, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota who specializes in public opinion, said it's not entirely clear why such a disparity exists between Minnesotans and Americans as a whole on the importance of the war.

"The issues are the same, here and nationally, so it's more a difference in degree instead of kind," Pearson said. "It's hard to draw conclusions until you have a longer trend to examine."

The poll found a partisan divide when it comes to the issues that will be most important next year. While roughly one-third of Democrats and independents who lean Democratic said Iraq is their top issue, only 12 percent of their GOP counterparts said so. The split on the importance of health care was similar.

Conversely, 10 times as many Republicans as Democrats identified immigration as the most important issue.

A Pawlenty effect?

McCain's relative strength in Minnesota -- he trails Giuliani by just 5 percentage points among poll respondents -- could have several explanations, starting with the fact that Gov. Tim Pawlenty is his marquee Minnesota supporter, Hofrenning said.

"There could definitely be a Pawlenty effect at work," he said. "But we've also got a maverick streak here, going back to strong support for [Ross] Perot [in 1992]. And he [McCain] is the pro-war, anti-Bush candidate."

In fact, the poll showed that McCain's supporters were far more likely than supporters of any other GOP candidate to disapprove of President Bush's performance.

"McCain is level-headed and seems like someone who will get the job done in Iraq," said Barbara Jackson, a poll respondent who lives in Lake City. "I'm rather pessimistic about the direction of the country and the job Bush has done, so we need someone optimistic and forward-thinking."

Giuliani, who has made a single campaign stop in Minnesota, "is the name I know the best on the Republican side," said Rachel Brolin, of Corcoran. "I may change my mind, but I think he could be a strong president."

Giuliani runs especially well among younger respondents, with the support of 37 percent of those ages 18 to 39.

Thompson, who also has visited the state, runs third among Republican poll respondents, in contrast to national polls where he runs second to Giuliani. And Romney, who is running strong in the kickoff states of Iowa and New Hampshire, lags with single-digit support among poll respondents.

In the Democratic race, Clinton is as dominant in Minnesota as she is nationwide, supported by 47 percent of Democrats and independents who lean toward the party.

"She's got a lot of good ideas, and since men have screwed up the country so much, why not give a woman a chance," said Aaron Deris, a special-education teacher from Bloomington. "I think the country is more ready to elect a woman than a black man."

Obama, whose presidential candidacy has become the most credible ever mounted by an African-American, received 22 percent support in the poll.

It isn't possible to measure in a statistically reliable way candidates' support by racial group because the sample sizes for the subgroups involved become too small.

But Obama's support is strongest among younger respondents, dropping off sharply among the oldest.

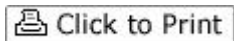
That doesn't surprise Carolyn Hamilton, an Obama supporter from Coon Rapids. "Older people just aren't ready for him, and I'm not sure the United States is, either," she said. "He'd be such a role model for black young people -- for all young people. Until he came along, I never cared for politics."

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