

USA-POLITICS/POLL

POLL-Clinton, Obama in New Hampshire dead heat

By John Whitesides, Political Correspondent

MANCHESTER, N.H., Jan 6 (Reuters) - Democrat Barack Obama has pulled into a virtual dead heat with Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire two days before the state's presidential nominating contest, according to a Reuters/C-SPAN/Zogby poll released on Sunday.

Republican rivals Mitt Romney and John McCain are also essentially deadlocked as the White House races in both parties tightened ahead of Tuesday's New Hampshire primary.

About half of the polling in the four-day tracking survey was conducted after the Iowa caucuses last Thursday, when Obama and Republican Mike Huckabee sailed to easy wins in the opening test of the U.S. presidential campaign.

Obama, an Illinois senator vying to be the first black president in U.S. history, pulled within one point of Clinton in the state's Democratic race -- a statistically insignificant lead. The poll in both races had a 3.4 percentage point margin of error.

Clinton, a New York senator and former first lady, led Obama 31 percent to 30 percent, with former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards at 20 percent. Before Iowa's caucuses, Clinton led Obama by six points.

"We are seeing clear movement in Obama's direction and away from Hillary Clinton," pollster John Zogby said. "There isn't much time for her to regroup here."

Romney, the former Massachusetts governor who lost in Iowa to Huckabee, gained two percentage points overnight to move ahead of McCain by one point, 32 percent to 31 percent, also well within the margin of error.

Huckabee, a Baptist minister and former Arkansas governor, was in third with 12 percent.

TOO CLOSE

"It's too close to call on the Republican side," Zogby said. "Romney is leading among Republican voters, and there has been a little movement for Huckabee but not a lot."

The rolling poll of 844 likely Democratic voters and 837 likely Republican voters was taken Wednesday through Saturday, before back-to-back debates by candidates in both parties on Saturday night.

New Hampshire's primary on Tuesday is the next battleground in the state-by-state process of choosing Republican and Democratic candidates for November's election to replace President George W. Bush.

The state is vital to efforts by Clinton and Romney to revitalize their campaigns after disappointing showings in Iowa.

Zogby said Obama had been helped and McCain had been hurt by the preference of independents, who can vote in either party's primary, to participate in the Democratic race.

McCain, an Arizona senator, won New Hampshire during his failed 2000 presidential bid with the help of substantial independent support.

But this year about 40 percent of independents expect to vote in the Democratic primary and only one-quarter in the Republican contest, Zogby said.

"Right now McCain's biggest problem may be going after Republican votes because there just aren't going to be as many opportunities among independents," Zogby said. "Obama seems to be gaining ground among independents."

About 7 percent of Republicans and 6 percent of Democrats remain undecided, according to the New Hampshire poll.

In the Democratic race, former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson was in fourth place at 7 percent, ahead of Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich at 3 percent.

In the Republican race, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was at 7 percent, slightly ahead of Texas Rep. Ron Paul at 6 percent. Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson was at 3 percent and California Rep. Duncan Hunter was at less than 1 percent.

The rolling tracking poll will continue each day until New Hampshire's vote on Tuesday. In a rolling poll, the most recent day's results are added while the oldest day's results are dropped in order to track changing momentum.

(Editing by Philip Barbara)

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