

## Problems to the Left, Problems to the Right

*While Obama Leapfrogs Clinton and McCain Continues to Thrive, Problems for Both Parties are Clear: Though Voters are Increasingly Negative toward the Direction of the Country and Anxious About the Economy They are not Ready to Turn to the Democrats... Yet*

It's commonly said throughout an election cycle that the candidate who winds up the victor is frequently the one who can best take the punches of a fiercely fought campaign and show the least damage by Election Day. While we are still several months away from that final conclusive metric, it is evident in this month's Diageo/*Hotline* poll of 799 registered voters that while both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have had an extraordinarily difficult past month, Obama has proven definitively that he can take a punch while Clinton has struggled. For the first time since the Diageo/*Hotline* poll began including a national Democratic primary ballot, not only has Sen. Obama taken a lead, it is a dominant one at that: 50% to Clinton's 38%. Even better for the junior senator from Illinois, his favorability rating among all registered voters has remained nearly exactly where it was in February (March, 56%; February, 57%) meaning his losses in Ohio and Texas and the explosion of controversy over his former pastor's remarks have done little damage. Democratic primary voters remain just as enthusiastic about voting for him in November as they did last month (March, 56%; February, 55%) and he has made key inroads into the vital demographic of female Democratic primary voters, increasing his margin among them from an 11 point deficit in February (Obama, 39%; Clinton, 50%) to a 4 point lead this month (Obama, 46%; Clinton 42%).

But so what? As some may be very quick to point out, the vast majority of primary contests have already been decided. What relevance then can a national primary poll still have? The quickest and most obvious answer lies in the simple fact that neither Obama nor Clinton can surpass the magic number of 2,024 delegates by winning the remaining primaries and caucuses alone. At this point, the path to the nomination passes directly through the superdelegates. With the vast majority of these potential king-makers being elected officials, it's nearly impossible to imagine that they will completely ignore not only the will of the party's electorate as expressed through the total popular vote, but also as expressed in public opinion polling as the primary season comes to a close. Because of this, national primary ballot polling may have even *greater* significance than usual as more and more primaries wrap up. Should Obama then maintain his lead in delegates, the popular votes AND a lead in national polls, the case against giving him the nomination would be virtually impossible to make.

What makes this situation even more challenging for Sen. Clinton is her main argument for the nomination, that she has the best chance of beating John McCain in November, is called into question again by this month's poll results. Not only does she badly trail John McCain in a head to head matchup, 50% to 41%, compared to Obama who trails McCain by a statistically insignificant two points, Clinton's favorability rating has taken a sharp dive since last month among registered voters, plummeting from 54% to 43%. Even worse, when it comes to the single most important issue among voters, the economy, just 20% of respondents say that, of the three remaining candidates, she would do the best job handling the nation's economy, placing her well behind Barack Obama (31%) and John McCain (35%).

While McCain's number on the economy may at first appear strong, it actually should be cause for great concern. After all, this question was asked of all registered voters, meaning that the people who feel the Democrats are the stronger party on this issue mostly split their vote between the two Democratic candidates. Thus, it's far more instructive to look at the combined number for the two Democrats which at 51% is far above McCain's 35%. Even more problematic for the senator from Arizona, voters who cite the economy as the most important issue facing the nation clearly prefer the Democratic candidates again this month. Not only does Barack Obama lead John McCain 51% to 39% among this segment of voters, but Hillary Clinton races out to a 49% to 42% lead over McCain among economy-focused voters as well.

Helping McCain greatly, however, is the close and increasingly combative nature of the Democratic contest. Not only has it allowed him to campaign virtually free from attacks, but Obama's and Clinton's partisans are increasingly turning to McCain. A stunning 29% of Clinton's primary supporters say that if the general election were held today between McCain and Obama, they would support McCain. This is a sharp increase from last month when 19% of Hillary's supporters said the same. While Obama's supporters appear more willing to support Clinton against McCain, the number is still high, 19%. Also, McCain could clearly be at an advantage should the election turn into one that focuses more on national security than the economy. He dominates both Clinton and Obama on the question of which candidate would best handle the nation's security, his 48% well ahead of the two Democrats' combined 42%. Also, McCain has once again become the darling of independents: a strong 62% of this vital segment of voters view him favorably.

Taken all together, this month's Diageo/*Hotline* poll reveals that both parties have both significant challenges and opportunities heading into the general election. Despite their dominance on the number one issue facing the country, the economy, the Democrats face the very real possibility of the nomination race lasting until the convention, which is extremely problematic. The last three times a party's nomination fight has gone all the way to their convention, the Republicans in 1976 and the Democrats in 1968 and 1980, it has proven disastrous for the party. While other factors obviously came into play in the general election in those years, having a sharply divided party for much of the election season gave too little time for the party to unify behind the candidate who was ultimately chosen and sowed doubts in the minds of the general electorate about a candidate whose own party seemed hesitant to support them. For the Republicans, McCain and the GOP's inability to effectively make their case for being able to manage the economy better than the Democrats could prove the factor that ultimately ends Republican control of the White House. Also, for the past century, only once, in 1988, has a party with a two-term president seen their next standard-bearer able to win the party a third term in the White House. Even worse for the 2008 GOP, the 1988 win not only followed on the heels of a popular president, Ronald Reagan, but the GOP nominee, then-Vice President George H.W. Bush, faced off against a weak Democratic nominee, all conditions which will not be present this November. The only real winners in this month's poll appear to be the general electorate. After all, if, as seems likely at this point, Obama and McCain wind up squaring off against each other, given both of their sky-high favorability ratings, the American voter may actually get to choose this year between which candidate they feel is best, rather than the least worst. Perhaps this in and of itself is the change the country has been waiting for.

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