

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Obama Leads But Race Remains Fluid with Possible McCain Lift from Choosing Pawlenty

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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According to a Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute poll, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama leads his Republican counterpart, John McCain, 48% to 38% among likely Minnesota voters. Three percent favor Ralph Nader and 1% supports Libertarian Bob Barr.

Presidential Choice of Likely Minnesota Voters

Obama	McCain	Nader	Barr	Somebody Else	DK / Refused
48%	38%	3%	1%	1%	10%

Despite Obama's lead, the race remains fluid: 10% are undecided; a bit more than 10% of Obama's and McCain's backers indicate that they may change their mind; and half of Nader's supporters and three quarters of Barr's say they too may switch to another candidate.

The survey was conducted of 763 likely voters between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008; the margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points.

Pawlenty Bump

Adding Governor Tim Pawlenty to the McCain ticket boosts McCain's support among likely Minnesota voters. About 1 in 5 indicate that they would be more likely to vote for the Republican if their Governor were the running mate. **McCain's choice of Pawlenty appears to lift his support by 13 points:** 25% of undecided voters and initial Obama supporters report that Pawlenty's presence on the ticket would pull them over. This could be enough to move Minnesota into the Republican column for the first time since 1972.

Choice of Pawlenty would boost McCain's support

	More likely to vote for McCain	Less likely to vote for McCain	It wouldn't make a difference
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All Likely Voters	21%	20%	57%
Undecided on Vote Choice or Initial Obama Supporters (53% of likely electorate)	25%	19%	54%

Angry Voters Punish McCain

Obama benefits from voter anger against President George W. Bush and the general country's direction. **Two thirds of likely Minnesota voters disapprove of the president's job performance and 70% of these critics plan to vote for Obama.** Compounding McCain's challenge, 52% are convinced that McCain would continue Bush's policies, with three quarters of these Minnesotans planning to support Obama.

Disapproval of Bush Hurts McCain

	Obama Supporters	McCain Supporters	Undecided Voters
Approve (32%)	4%	85%	6%
Disapprove (66%)	70%	14%	12%

Minnesota voters appear to be punishing John McCain for the weak economy and other frustrations. Three quarters of likely voters indicate that the country is going in the wrong direction. Fifty-nine percent of these disgruntled voters support Obama in contrast to only 25% who favor McCain. Obama is also picking up more support than McCain from voters who don't trust the government (49% vs.34%).

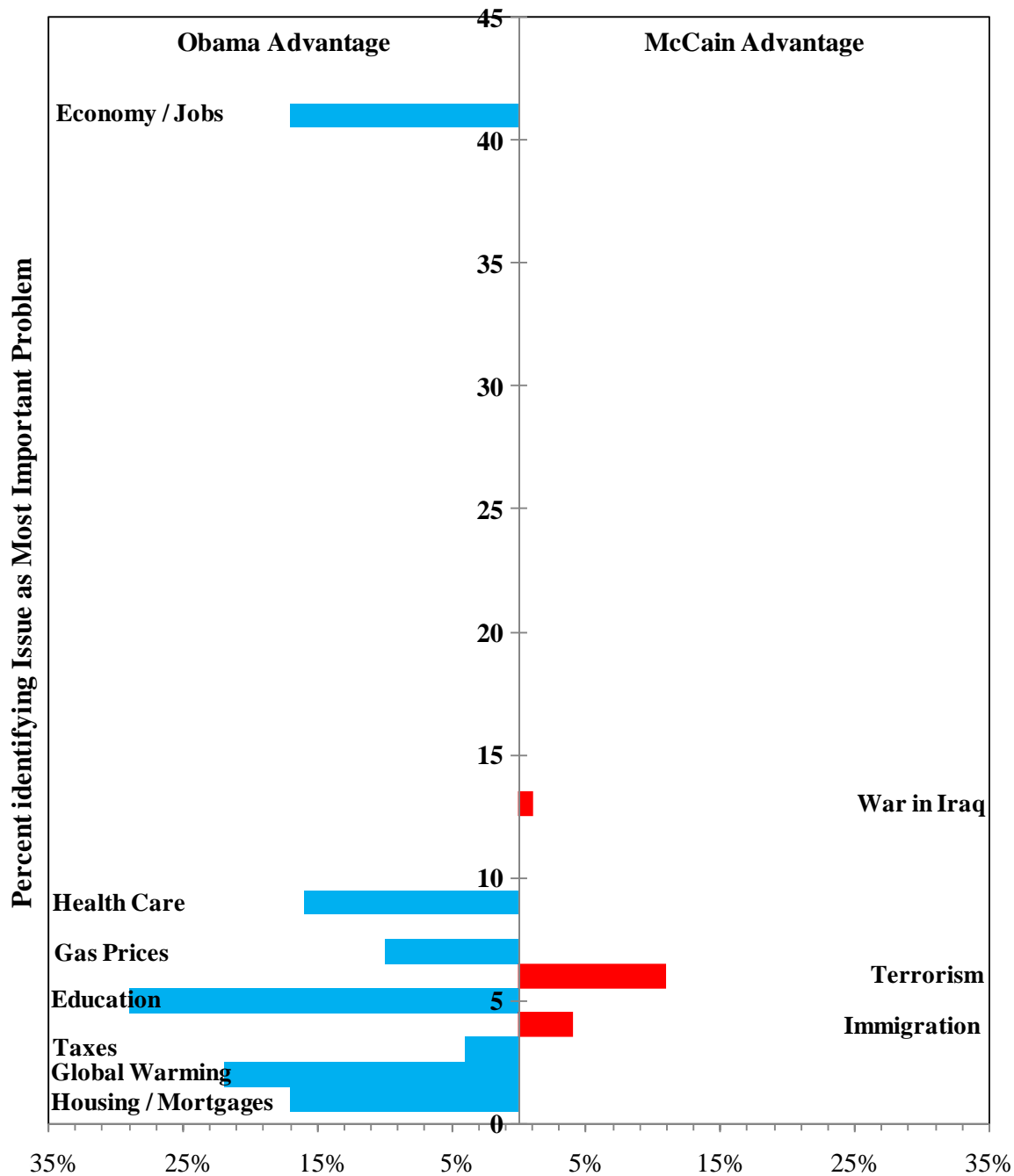
Voters Blame McCain for Country heading in Wrong Direction

	Obama Supporters	McCain Supporters	Undecided Voters
Right Track (18%)	10%	83%	4%
Wrong Direction (77%)	59%	25%	11%

The economy and jobs are the dominant worry of Minnesotans, putting a further drag on the McCain campaign. When presented with 10 challenges facing the country, 41% identified the economy and jobs as the single most important problem. The Iraq War lags considerably with only 13% rating it as the country's top problem and other challenges fail to reach double digits. There are surprises as some issues fail to land on Minnesotans' agenda including gas prices and the housing crunch, which may be lumped in with the economy. Immigration – a searing topic of debate during the Republican primary – has also faded.

The problems that most concern Minnesotans are working in Obama's favor. Obama holds a 23 point advantage over McCain in handling the economy while the Republican's advantage emerges on the issues of terrorism and immigration that voters rate as far less important.

Obama's advantage on salient national problems, McCain's on less salient problems



One of the biggest surprises of 2008 is that Iraq has been neutralized and no longer works to the advantage of Democrats. Both candidates are trusted equally to handle it (McCain has a statistically insignificant 1 percentage point edge) and its ranking as a national problem has dramatically declined (only 13% rate it as the most important issue facing the country compared to 50% in October 2006). More Minnesota voters now support President Bush and McCain's position of allowing events to dictate troop withdrawal (50%) (including a quarter of Obama's supporters) instead of Obama's position of setting a 16 month withdrawal timetable (44%).

Setting No Timetable in Iraq works for McCain

	A timetable	No timetable	Both (vol.)
All Likely Voters	44%	50%	2%
Obama (48%)	68%	25%	3%
McCain (38%)	14%	82%	1%

Democratic Tilt

McCain is competing on an uneven electoral playing field. **Fifty percent of a representative sample of Minnesotan adults identify themselves as Democratic** compared to 36 percent who declare themselves Republican. This is consistent with previous polls in January 2008 and October 2006.

Party identification among Minnesota Residents

	August 2008	January 2008	October 2006
Republican	36%	34%	37%
Independent	11%	15%	13%
Democrat	50%	51%	48%

With Obama and McCain each drawing 85% of their fellow partisans, the Democrat enters the fall campaign with more voters aligning with his party.

Minnesota voters who do not associate with the Democratic or Republican parties may well swing the presidential election. **Obama and McCain are currently splitting half of the swing vote** but more than one third (36%) remains up for grabs.

Obama enjoys a strong gender gap. Despite warnings that Hillary Clinton’s defeat might alienate women, women voters prefer Obama over McCain by 16 points (52% to 36%) while men are split between the two candidates.

Obama benefits from gender gap

	Obama	McCain	Other candidate	DK / Refused
Male (48%)	42%	40%	7%	12%
Female (52%)	52%	36%	3%	9%

Indeed, **adding Hillary Clinton to the Obama ticket appears to do more damage than good** among key groups of voters. Nearly twice as many undecided voters and initial Obama supporters report that they would be less likely rather than more likely to vote for Obama if he chose Clinton as his running mate.

Downside of Selecting Clinton as VP

	Selecting Clinton as VP would make respondent...
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	More likely to vote for Obama	Less likely to vote for Obama	It wouldn't make a difference
Undecided on Vote Choice or Initial Obama Supporters (53% of likely electorate)	17%	32%	51%

The enthusiasm of Democrats is also propelling Obama. More than twice as many Democrats than Republicans are “extremely enthusiastic” about the upcoming presidential election (26% vs 11%). Meanwhile, Republicans express muted or no enthusiasm: 66% of Republicans indicated that they are only “somewhat enthusiastic,” “not too enthusiastic,” or “not enthusiastic at all” compared to 45 percent among Democrats. **One key to watch are independents who are decidedly lukewarm: 72% express muted or no enthusiasm.** Put simply, the enthusiasm bug may help engage and turnout Democrats but independents may not be immune.

Democrats are Fired Up; Republicans and Independents are Muted

	Extremely enthusiastic	Very enthusiastic	Somewhat enthusiastic	Not too enthusiastic	Not enthusiastic at all
Republicans	11%	24%	39%	18%	9%
Independents	6%	18%	32%	22%	18%
Democrats	26%	29%	28%	12%	5%

Minnesotan voters are also a bit more comfortable with Obama’s political views. When voters were asked whether they considered each candidate’s political views “about right” or too liberal or conservative, more voters reported that Obama’s political views were “about right” (50%) than McCain’s (40%). About equal proportions considered the candidates too extreme – 38% viewed Obama as too liberal and 37% thought McCain too conservative.

Voters a bit more comfortable with Obama’s political views

	Consider political attitudes of candidates:		
	Too Liberal	About Right	Too Conservative
Obama	38%	50%	4%
McCain	13%	40%	37%

Obama’s Liabilities

Obama faces notable hurdles. More than a third of Minnesota voters (37%) indicate that they are less likely to pull the lever for Obama because he is new to national politics. While some of these are Republicans who would not otherwise support Obama, **20% of independents and Democrats confess leerness about Obama’s inexperience.**

Misperceptions about Obama’s religion (perhaps owing to his first name and misinformation) may also be a drag on his support. **Nine percent incorrectly report that he is Muslim and another 42% did not know that he is a practicing Christian.** **Nine percent of voters indicate that his religion makes them less supportive** though these appear to be mostly Republicans and others unlikely to support him regardless. Nonetheless, McCain does enjoy a sizeable lead among

evangelicals who make up 26% of Minnesota’s likely electorate. The Republican leads by 25 points among evangelicals (57% to 32%).

Race is a potential drag on Obama, though it is difficult to sort out. When asked directly, few Minnesotans indicate that race would diminish their support for the Democrat. But when approached on the issue more indirectly by asking about whether or not “most people you know” would vote for a black presidential candidate, 13 percent reported that race would be a factor in reducing support. This more indirect measure of potential racial bias could hurt Obama as 48% of these respondents are Democrats and 10% are swing voters.

Although Obama’s race appears to be a factor, it is important to appreciate that Obama is doing better among white voters than Democratic presidential nominees of the recent past. Indeed, our July 2004 survey found that President Bush and Senator Kerry split the white vote. By contrast, Obama holds a 7 point edge (46% to 39%) among likely white voters in August 2008.

In terms of McCain, age is a hurdle. Twenty six percent of Minnesotans and 12% of independents and Republicans report that they are less likely to vote for McCain because he is 71 years old.

Hurdles for McCain and Obama

	Less likely to vote for candidate because:	
	All Voters	Independents & Fellow Partisans
McCain’s Age	26%	12%
Obama being new to national politics	37%	20%
Obama’s Religion	9%	3%
Obama’s Race	3%	2%

The Guy

The political environment and the issues enter into the decisions of voters but so too does their evaluation of the candidate as a person. Minnesotans offer a fairly balanced assessment of the strengths and limitations of each candidate.

Change continues to work powerfully for Obama. By a 43 point margin, Minnesotans describe Obama as more likely than McCain to bring about “real change.” Just over a fifth report that the most important quality in a president is that they will bring about change; among these voters, Obama is favored over McCain by 74 points in the presidential race.

Obama is seen as more empathetic and in sync with voters on issues. By a nearly 20 point margin, Minnesotans describe Obama over McCain as “caring about me.” About a quarter report that the most important quality in selecting the president is their closeness on the issues; Obama is

avored by 18 points among these issue-oriented voters. Obama is also seen as an independent thinker, surpassing McCain by 22 points (56% to 34%).

But **Minnesotans find McCain’s values more appealing.** About a quarter report that sharing the values of the presidential candidate is the most important quality in their decision and these voters break in McCain’s favor by 20 points (52% to 32%).

Minnesotans are also strongly drawn to McCain’s experience over Obama’s by a 66 point margin (79% vs. 13%). In a potentially telling finding, however, **only 8% of likely voters rank experience as the most important quality in choosing a president.**

The personal trait of strong leadership works in McCain’s favor but less so than might be expected given McCain’s more extensive experience and military record. McCain enjoys a narrow edge over Obama as a strong leader (50% to 41%). Only 12% single this trait out as the most important determinant in choosing a president. This is another potential case where a personal strength of McCain’s fails to register strongly with voters.

The Battle of the Ages

Obama leads among younger voters. But McCain enjoys a 7 point advantage among older voters -- the segment of the electorate that turns out at the highest rates. A key challenge for Obama will be turning out younger voters.

	Obama	McCain	Nader	Barr	Somebody Else	DK / Refused
18-29 (14%)	51%	38%	3%	1%	1%	6%
30-44 (27%)	50%	42%	0%	1%	0%	8%
45-59 (31%)	50%	34%	5%	1%	1%	9%
60 and older (28%)	43%	36%	2%	2%	1%	16%

A Comparison with Previous Surveys of the Presidential Contest.

Our finding that Obama leads McCain by 10 points differs from two polls conducted toward the end of last week when the Democrat was on vacation – a Rasmussen poll conducted on August 13 and a SurveyUSA poll conducted on August 13 and 14. Both of these polls reported that the race was within the margin of error and therefore a toss-up in statistical terms.

Although it is difficult to compare our results with these two surveys because the specific details of their methods are not publicly released, there are some clear differences. First, last week’s polls were conducted over a short 1 to 2-day period, which may allow short-term developments (like the conflict between Russia and Georgia) to produce the appearance of a boost for a candidate that quickly fades. In contrast, our survey was conducted during the course of 11 days that encompassed Obama’s vacation and the Russia-Georgia flare-up but also extended beyond these events to Sunday. In addition, the longer period of interviewing allows us to call back

respondents who may have been out or initially did not respond. This is a critical, but time-consuming process for creating a high quality sample and accurate results.

Second, SurveyUSA’s methodology for determining likely voters first filters out all respondents who say they are not currently registered to vote at the time of the survey. None of these unregistered voters are included in the final survey results because they are determined to be unlikely to vote. This presents a particular problem in Minnesota because a substantial number of voters register on Election Day. The result of SurveyUSA exclusion of unregistered voters likely leads to an underestimation of support for Obama, as young people (especially those who were not 18 at the time of the last election) are filtered out. SurveyUSA’s likely voter methodology also has the side effect of filtering out people who might not have been enthusiastic enough about previous elections to have registered, but are enthusiastic enough this year to register on Election Day. These voters also appear to be particularly supportive of Obama. In contrast, our likely voter methodology does not automatically filter out unregistered voters. (Rasmussen’s specific likely voter methodology is not made public on their website.)

Third, SurveyUSA and Rasmussen rely on computer-assisted interviews while our polls used live human interviewers. These different modes may impact the sample of who is interviewed as well as the behavior of the respondents. Finally, our vote choice question explicitly offered Ralph Nader and Bob Barr as options, whereas neither of the other two polls explicitly offered these choices.

Bracketing the two surveys during Obama’s vacation, our finding of a 10-point Obama lead is similar to the findings of other polls of Minnesotans conducted before Obama’s vacation. Obama led by double digits in 7 of the previous 10 surveys dating to May.

Pollster	Date	Sample	Obama (D)	McCain (R)	Spread
SurveyUSA	8/13-8/14	682 LV	47	45	Obama +2
Rasmussen	8/13-8/13	700 LV	49	45	Obama +4
Quinnipiac / WSJ / WP	7/14-7/22	1261 LV	46	44	Obama +2
Rasmussen	7/22-7/22	500 LV	52	39	Obama +13
Rasmussen	7/10-7/10	500 LV	54	37	Obama +17
Quinnipiac / WSJ / WP	6/17-6/24	1572 LV	54	37	Obama +17
Zogby	6/11-6/30	830 LV	48	32	Obama +16
SurveyUSA	6/13-6/16	543 LV	47	46	Obama +1
Rasmussen	6/11-6/11	500 LV	52	39	Obama +13
SurveyUSA	5/16-5/18	600 LV	47	42	Obama +5
Rasmussen	5/22-5/22	500 LV	53	38	Obama +15
Star Tribune	5/12-5/15	1117 LV	51	38	Obama +13

About the Survey

This survey is a collaboration between Minnesota Public Radio and the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. The survey was analyzed by the Center. The research team was Lawrence R. Jacobs (director) and Joanne M. Miller (Department of Political Science). Melanie Burns was the team's research and data analyst.

The survey was fielded by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, which has extensive national and state experience conducting non-partisan surveys on politics and government policy. CSRA called a sample of telephone exchanges that was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within the State of Minnesota. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. The sample was designed to represent different regions of the state in proportion to the number of adults living in each region. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

Results are based on a model which adjusts responses according to the likelihood of a respondent voting. Likelihood to vote is based on the following factors: self-reported probability of voting in the upcoming election, voting in previous elections as reported by the respondent, enthusiasm for the 2008 election, and incorporates differential turnout levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In addition, the results have been weighted to reflect the number of adults in a household and the number of telephone lines reaching the household as well as the demographic characteristics of adults in Minnesota based on region, sex, age, education, and race. Our analysis indicates that 70% percent of Minnesotans who are 18 or over are likely to vote in November.

The distribution of party identification among Minnesotan residents in the full sample is as follows:

	August 2008
Republican	39%
Independent	10%
Democrat	50%

1,093 residents of Minnesota were interviewed by telephone between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008; the margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points. In theory, in 19 cases out of 20 the results among Minnesota residents will differ by no more than 3.6 percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by interviewing all likely voters in the state. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.