

Clemson University Palmetto Poll

Executive Summary

As the South Carolina presidential primary draws near, voters across the state are still unsure of whom they will support in the Republican primary on Jan. 19 and the Democratic primary on Jan. 26. The third Clemson University Palmetto Poll finds both contests close with most voters paying attention, but unsure of who will capture their allegiance in January.

The number of undecided voters went up from the last poll in August to November, with some 28 percent of the Republicans and 49 percent of the Democrats saying that they had not made up their minds. Importantly, the Palmetto Poll asked respondents if they were likely to stay with the person they choose or “change their mind: between now and January.” About 65 percent of the Republicans and 51 percent of the Democrats said they were likely to change their minds before the election in January.

In the Republican contest, Mitt Romney (17 percent) and Fred Thompson (15 percent) are within the margin of error of the poll. The poll has a plus or minus 4.62 percent error in each party subgroup, and was of 450 likely Republican and 450 likely Democratic voters. The surprising third-place candidate was the fast-closing Mike Huckabee (13 percent) with John McCain next at 11 percent. Huckabee is the most improved candidate in the GOP field since the last Palmetto Poll in August, rising to “top-tier” status in South Carolina. The candidate who has lost the most momentum is Rudy Giuliani (9 percent) who has dropped from being a leader in August to a trailing fifth now.

Among the Democrats the top two candidates are all within the margin of error, with Hillary Clinton (19 percent) barely ahead of Barack Obama (17 percent), and John Edwards (12 percent) improving in the only primary state he won in 2004. In the two months since the last Palmetto Poll, Clinton has watched her lead shrink by seven points and has dropped back to the rest of the field.

Clemson University Palmetto Poll

Tables and Explanation

With less than two months to go before the crucial South Carolina presidential primary, the Clemson University Palmetto Poll finds that only about one-third of the likely voters in the Democratic and Republican primaries have a good idea about who they will vote for in the election next year.

Every candidate for president, in both political parties, has spent time in South Carolina, and several are now running television ads in anticipation of the January vote. The Clemson University Palmetto Poll was conducted between Nov. 14 and Nov. 27, with four days off for the Thanksgiving holidays.

Respondents were chosen for either party sample if they voted in at least one of the past four Democratic or Republican primaries. All were asked if they were going to vote in January of 2008. These primary voters are different from general election voters in that they are better informed, are somewhat older and better educated and generally more interested in politics. More than half of voters in the Republican sample were aged 55 years or older, and the voting cohort for the GOP primary is 97 percent racially white. The Democratic sample is 60 percent female and evenly split racially, with black voters being slightly more than half of expected primary voters.

The Republican primary is set for Saturday, Jan. 19, and the Democratic primary is set one week later, on Saturday, Jan. 26. Four hundred fifty respondents were interviewed in each

party sample for a total of 900 respondents. The poll has an error rate of plus or minus 4.62 percent in each party subgroup.

The first question asked respondents how closely they were following the present election. The placement of the South Carolina primaries immediately after the Christmas holidays means that candidate commercials will be running in competition with business advertising. How closely are South Carolina voters following the campaign in November?

Q1. Thinking about the 2008 presidential election, which of the following best describes your thoughts on this contest?

	Republicans		Democrats	
	August	November	August	November
1. Have a good idea about who to support.	26 percent	34 percent	32 percent	33 percent
2. Have been following the news but haven't decided.	65 percent	56 percent	52 percent	56 percent
3. Not paying much attention	29 percent	6 percent	36 percent	8 percent

The August poll allowed respondents to be in multiple categories when asked about their attention to the campaign. The November poll asked them to specify one of the response categories. The voters here are following the news, but remain open to candidate commercial appeals and television coverage of their visits. We find that most people are following the news coverage of the election, but only about one-third have a good idea about who they will support.

Previous Palmetto Polls have asked about name recognition and favorability ratings of the candidates. The November poll assumed that the candidates were making an impression, or not making an impression, on the voters. Accordingly we followed the question about attention to the campaign with the familiar head-to-head race for each party.

Q2. If the 2008 presidential primary in South Carolina were held today, for whom would you vote?

Republicans:	August	November	Percent change
Fred Thompson	19 percent	15 percent	-4 percent
Rudy Giuliani	18 percent	9 percent	-9 percent
John McCain	15 percent	11 percent	-4 percent
Mitt Romney	11 percent	17 percent	+6 percent
Mike Huckabee	6 percent	13 percent	+7 percent
Ron Paul	1 percent	6 percent	+5 percent
Duncan Hunter	--	1 percent	+1 percent
Tom Tancred	--	--	--
Undecided	20 percent	28 percent	+8 percent

The most improved candidate in the field is Mike Huckabee, followed by Mitt Romney.

We note that Romney is the candidate who has been most visible on television since the last Palmetto Poll in August. The improved standing of Mike Huckabee makes him now a top-tier candidate in South Carolina. Ron Paul remains a second-tier candidate, but he has improved his standing statewide. Rudy Giuliani has dropped precipitously in the past two months. In the first Palmetto Poll in October, 2006 Giuliani was a familiar name and popular choice for Republican voters, but since August he has lost half his support among primary voters.

We note that the number of undecided voters in this second poll of 2007 has risen. As the election itself draws closer, voters are taking their responsibilities more seriously, and respondents are less likely to make casual selection when queried about who they are likely to support in the January vote.

Democrats:	August	November	Percent Change
Hillary Clinton	26 percent	19 percent	-7 percent
Barack Obama	16 percent	17 percent	+1 percent
John Edwards	10 percent	12 percent	+2 percent
Joe Biden	3 percent	2 percent	-1 percent
Bill Richardson	2 percent	1 percent	-1 percent
Chris Dodd	--	--	--
Dennis Kucinich	--	--	--
Mike Gravel	--	--	--
Undecided	35 percent	49 percent	+14 percent

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are in a statistical dead heat in the state, and much of the lead Clinton had in August has evaporated. More than half the expected Democratic vote in 2008 will be in the African American community. As expected, Obama is drawing heavily from

this group: more than three-quarters of his supporters are African-American. Clinton is drawing over half her support from this cohort as well.

The most important figure is the number of undecided voters in the Democratic subgroup, which totals nearly half of those surveyed.

The final question in the Palmetto Poll asked voters about “how sure” they were that their choice of a candidate was conclusive. Voters were asked the following question as a follow-up after they made a choice for the primary election.

Q3. Are you sure about voting for _____ or might you change your mind before the South Carolina primary elections?

Republicans:

Very sure	33 percent
Might change	65 percent
DK/NA	2 percent

Democrats:

Very sure	49 percent
Might change	51 percent
DK/NA	--

Most voters in both parties expressed reservations about having made a final choice for the presidential primary next January. Clearly, the outcome in South Carolina is up for grabs.