

Obama, Huckabee lead 2008 race in Iowa: poll

Sun Dec 2, 2007 4:39pm EST

By John Whitesides, Political Correspondent

DES MOINES, Iowa (Reuters) - Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mike Huckabee surged into narrow leads in Iowa in a poll released on Sunday, barely a month before the state holds the first contest in a shifting 2008 presidential race.

The poll by the Des Moines Register, the state's largest newspaper, showed Obama with a three-point edge over national front-runner Hillary Clinton in Iowa, 28 percent to 25 percent, and former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards third at 23 percent.

Among Republicans, Huckabee moved past previous leader Mitt Romney to take a five-point edge, 29 percent to 24 percent. Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who leads national polls, trails in third place at 13 percent.

The poll of 500 likely Iowa caucus-goers in each party had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percent.

The new poll follows other recent surveys showing Obama, an Illinois senator, and Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, picking up steam in Iowa and nationally one month before Iowa's January 3 contest kicks off the state-by-state battle to choose candidates for the November 2008 election.

Obama, campaigning in Iowa, said the shifting polls explained the growing frequency and intensity of attacks on him from Clinton, a New York senator and former first lady.

"Folks from some of the other campaigns are reading the polls and starting to get stressed, and issuing a whole range of outlandish accusations," Obama said.

"All these accusations that are starting to come out seem to correspond to shifting political fortunes," he told reporters.

Clinton's campaign on Sunday renewed its criticism of Obama for using his "Hope Fund" leadership political action committee for campaign contributions to politicians in crucial early voting states like Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

Clinton spokesman Howard Wolfson, appearing on CBS's "Face the Nation," called the committee "a slush fund" and asked Obama's campaign to shut it down.

WITHIN THE LAW

Obama said the fund operated within the law and suggested Clinton's campaign

"focus on trying to get their supporters to caucus" in Iowa.

Clinton's campaign also attacked Obama for telling reporters in Iowa he had not been planning a presidential run "for however number of years some of the other candidates have been planning for."

Clinton spokesman Phil Singer said the comment was at odds with what Obama's teachers, classmates and staff have said about his ambitions. "Senator Obama's campaign rhetoric is getting in the way of reality," Singer said.

Huckabee, appearing on ABC's "This Week," said his campaign was "on fire" in part because voters were being drawn to his underdog candidacy.

"That's why there's an excitement about my campaign," he said. "It's about all those Americans out there who were told what they couldn't do, what they couldn't become."

Huckabee, a social conservative and former Baptist preacher, had lingered in low single digits all year and barely raised any money until a surprise second-place showing in the Iowa straw poll in August propelled him on a slow climb.

The Register poll showed Huckabee was winning the support of Iowa's large bloc of social and religious conservatives, and led Romney 38 percent to 22 percent among those who describe themselves as born-again Christians.

Romney, a former Massachusetts governor who has vastly outspent Huckabee in Iowa, lost five percentage points in support since leading the last Register poll in October.

Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson was fourth in the Iowa poll with 9 percent and Arizona Sen. John McCain fifth with 7 percent, tied with Texas Rep. Ron Paul.

Giuliani, Thompson and McCain all have concentrated their campaigning on later states in the 2008 contest.

McCain on Sunday picked up the endorsement of the Manchester Union Leader newspaper, the state's biggest and an influential conservative voice in the state that holds the second nominating contest just five days after Iowa.

"I'm grateful for it and I think it will give us a boost," McCain, who has focused more of his effort on New Hampshire, said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

Among Democrats, the Register poll showed Obama leading among women, 31 percent to 26 percent for Clinton, who led among the older voters who dominate the Iowa contest.

(Editing by Vicki Allen)

(To read more about the U.S. political campaign, visit Reuters "Tales from the Trail: 2008" online at blogs.reuters.com/trail08/)

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