

## Timing of polls matters in politics: experts

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By Ellen Wulforst

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Republican Rudy Giuliani holds a strong lead in national presidential polls, but runs a distant second in early-voting New Hampshire. Mike Huckabee has an edge among Republicans in Iowa, but places fifth in nationwide surveys. What's a voter to think?

With such disparate results, opinion polls would seem to hold little value. But read properly and at the right time, political polls offer plenty of insight, experts say.

Among the Democrats, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton leads in national polls, but is in a tight three-way battle in Iowa with Illinois Sen. Barack Obama and former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards.

Most simply, national polls reflect what issues are important to voters but provide little information as to who is winning, the analysts said. Early state polls are handier for judging the horse race of candidates, they say.

Mickey Blum of the Blum & Weprin Associates polling firm says polls in Iowa and New Hampshire are useful because those states cast the first votes to nominate the Republican and Democratic candidates for the November 2008 election.

"Pay a lot of attention to those early states, because no matter who's leading nationwide, the person who wins those states ... can change the whole contest," she said.

A national poll showing former New York Mayor Giuliani ahead signals how important terrorism and security still are to Republican voters after the September 11 attacks, said Jennifer Donahue, an analyst at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics.

"It gives you a little pulse, a little sense, but it's not predictive," she said.

Timing is key. National polls fade in significance as state primaries begin, said Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. Huckabee, the former Republican governor of Arkansas, for example, has gained ground on former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in Iowa and even passed him in a poll in state's largest newspaper on Sunday.

National polls will be valuable again after the nominees are picked, but state polls resurge as Election Day nears and swing states like Ohio and Florida take the spotlight, he said.

### HANDICAPPING THE RACE

Polls in Iowa and New Hampshire are best for handicapping the race because that's where the earliest voters can be found. Iowa holds its caucus on January

3; the New Hampshire primary is on January 8.

"State polls may be even more valuable ultimately because that is the primary trail. They reflect the presence of very intense campaigning that other states are not getting," Miringoff said.

Even a month before the first votes, a state poll can be extremely misleading, Donahue cautioned. At this point in the 2004 race, Democrat Howard Dean had a huge lead over John Kerry in New Hampshire, where Kerry won. At this point in the 2000 race, Republican George W. Bush led Arizona Sen. John McCain in New Hampshire, but lost that primary by 18 points, she said.

"In 2000 and 2004, the polls were so incorrect at this point in time as to be completely meaningless," she said.

The closer to the contest date, the more accurate a poll should be, she said, adding that New Hampshire voters tend to make up their minds at the very last minute.

Similar polling headaches hold true in Iowa where, despite the hoopla, few people participate in the caucuses, Blum said. Turnout is usually less than 10 percent.

Candidates can face what she called "the Howard Dean issue," where they seem popular but their supporters don't attend a caucus. Iowa voters also discuss candidates inside the caucus meetings and try to sway one another's opinions.

"People change their minds, so when you're polling them, this is what they believe," Blum said. "It isn't that you're wrong. It's what they thought at that time. That's when you took the picture."

(Editing by Patricia Zengerle)

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