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Obama has huge lead among Hispanic voters, poll finds

By Lesley Clark | McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Barack Obama has picked up support from nearly all the Hispanic voters who voted for rival Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries, giving him a nearly three-to-one lead over Republican John McCain among Hispanics, a poll released Thursday shows.

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The Pew Hispanic Center survey found Obama with 66 percent of the Hispanic vote to McCain's 23 percent.

The results represent a "sharp reversal" in Obama's fortunes from the primaries, when he lost the Latino vote to Clinton by nearly two-to-one, prompting speculation that Hispanics were leery of voting for a black candidate, said Susan Minushkin, the center's deputy director.

Instead, the survey found that three times as many respondents said that being black would help Obama with Latino voters. A majority — 53 percent — said his race would make no difference to Latino voters.

More than 76 percent of Hispanics who said they voted for Clinton now say they're leaning toward voting for Obama, while just 8 percent said they were leaning toward McCain.

The poll by the nonpartisan research organization is based on a telephone survey of 2,015 Hispanics, 892 of whom were registered voters. Interviews in either English or Spanish were conducted June 9 through July 13. The survey carries a margin of error of 4.4 percentage points.

The poll comes as both campaigns seek to woo Hispanic voters. McCain has been advertising for six weeks on Spanish radio in Florida, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada, four battleground states with sizeable Hispanic populations. Obama's campaign Wednesday unveiled its first Spanish-language ad in Florida.

Both candidates also have appeared before Hispanic groups to pledge support for a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. But McCain has faced a steep climb: Critics have accused him of softening his support for his own immigration legislation during the GOP primaries, when his support for immigration reform threatened to derail his candidacy.

The poll suggests that the GOP brand is sinking with Latinos, even as it suggests that immigration isn't a driving factor for the Hispanic electorate.

Perhaps most troubling for the GOP, the center said it found that since 2006 Latino voters have moved "sharply" into the Democratic column, "reversing a pro-GOP tide that had been evident among Latinos earlier in the decade."

"More than half all Latino voters say that Obama is better for Hispanics," Minushkin said.

According to the poll, 65 percent of Latino registered voters now say they identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared with 26 percent who identify or lean toward the Republican Party.

The center said the shift "appears driven in part by an overall dissatisfaction with the state of the country — 70 percent of Latino registered voters say the country is going in the wrong direction."

According to the poll, top issues were education, the cost of living, jobs and health care. Fewer Hispanics rated crime, the war in Iraq or immigration as priorities.

To view the report, go to:

<http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=90>

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