

John DiStaso's Granite Status: Nine in 10 GOP primary voters uncommitted



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By JOHN DiSTASO

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A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS. The overriding point made by the WMUR-CNN presidential primary poll this week is that while Granite Staters are just beginning to pay attention to the GOP race, they're far from making a firm decision on who they will support.

Mitt Romney held a big lead in [the poll of 347 likely Republican primary voters conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center between May 17 and 22](#) — 32 percent to 9 percent for second-placer Ron Paul.

Newt Gingrich and Rudy Giuliani were named by only 6 percent each, with Sarah Palin at 5 percent and Michele Bachmann at 4 percent.

Despite campaigning in New Hampshire relentlessly for the better part of a year, Tim Pawlenty received only 4 percent and Rick Santorum, 2 percent.

Newcomer Jon Huntsman drew 4 percent, as did Mitch Daniels, who dropped out of the race on Sunday.

Seventeen percent of those polled were undecided. The margin of error was 5.2 percent.

UNH poll director Andrew Smith said that before the likely voters were asked the horse race question of who they would vote for if the primary were held today, they were first asked if they were sure at this point who they intend to vote for. A striking 87 percent said they had no idea who they will end up voting for, while only 4 percent said they had definitely decided and 9 percent were leaning.

Smith said that at this point in the last cycle, an early June 2007 poll had 37 percent saying they had decided or were leaning, while 57 percent said they had no idea who they would support.

That's a huge difference of course. Why the gap?

For one thing, the race was much further along in May and June of 2007 than it is today. As Smith noted, the “big names” — Romney, Giuliani and John McCain — were more active.

Of course, in New Hampshire, voters' decision are never truly firmed up until about a week, if not a day, before the primary.

At the same time, according to Smith, there is just as much interest in the current GOP primary at this point in the cycle as there was last time.

In the latest poll, 42 percent of likely GOP primary voters said they were “extremely” interested in the primary, while 32 percent were “very” interested for a total of 74 percent.

In early June 2007, Smith said, 34 percent were “extremely” interested and 40 percent were “very” interested, for a total of 74 percent.

Still, interest in the primary has actually waned since last summer and fall when 61 and 58 percent,

respectively, said they were extremely interested.

Smith attributed the drop to a natural erosion of general interest in elections, an interest level that peaked during the height of the 2010 campaign.

On a corresponding question, 65 percent of those polled said they will definitely vote in the primary, down from 81 percent a month ago, but another 18 percent said in the recent poll they will vote barring an emergency.

Another key question tested the level of satisfaction with the field and the result was that 9 percent were “very” satisfied, 42 percent were “somewhat” satisfied, 28 percent were “somewhat” dissatisfied and 15 percent were “very” dissatisfied.

Romney, because he is best known among the candidates, held big leads over the field when voters were asked to name the strongest leader (40 percent to 12 percent for Giuliani), the most believable (20 percent to 12 percent for Paul), the most likeable (29 percent to 10 percent for Palin), the most likely to defeat President Barack Obama (42 percent to 4 percent for Giuliani) and the person with the “right” experience (37 percent to 13 percent for Gingrich).

Romney was also picked as the person who can “best handle” the economy (44 percent to 7 percent for Gingrich), the deficit (37 percent to 7 percent each for Gingrich and Paul) and health care (31 percent to 8 percent for Paul).

Giuliani edged Romney as the candidate who can “best handle” terrorism, 19 to 16 percent with 13 percent for Gingrich.

It's all good news for Romney — almost.

His support is actually slightly lower than April (36 percent), February (40 percent) and last October (36 percent), but Smith said that's a “natural occurrence” as others gain even minimal support.

“He's still three times higher than the next person and no other support is going to a single person,” Smith said. “It's an indication that as the local guy, he's got a solid base of support he can work from.”

Still, Granite Staters know that being the frontrunner at this early stage can be dangerous.

With his lead based almost entirely on name recognition at this point, Romney is the target of constant Democratic attacks and he'll eventually be the target of the other GOP candidates.

The lesser-known candidates, pretty much regardless of how much “earned media” — that is news coverage — they receive, really won't start building name recognition until they begin television advertising.

That's why the camps of candidates like Pawlenty and Santorum can still be optimistic even in low single digits.

Still, as Smith said, “They do have a reason for some concern. It takes time to build name recognition, and lower poll numbers usually mean a more difficult time raising money” for the advertising that will build their name recognition.

PATAKI ON THE AIR. Former New York Gov. George Pataki hit the television airwaves in New Hampshire yesterday with a new ad for his nonprofit advocacy group, [“No American Debt.”](#)

“Both parties got us here,” Pataki says in the ad, “reckless spending, record debt.”

But he then targets only President Barack Obama, accusing him of ignoring both his own bipartisan commission's suggestions for reducing the deficit as well as attacking the GOP plan put forward by U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan.

Pataki charges that Obama's proposal is to “raise taxes and cut spending — somewhere, someday.

“That's no plan,” Pataki says, urging viewers to join his group.

The ad began airing on WMUR and regionally on Fox News yesterday, the day after Pataki came to the state to talk about reducing the debt and deficit.

Pataki spokesman David Catalfamo said an ad buy was placed through June 13, the date of the New Hampshire presidential primary debate at Saint Anselm College, cosponsored by the New Hampshire Union Leader, WMUR and CNN.

The ad is the first by an advocacy group aired in conjunction with the first-in-the-nation primary.

Pataki has not totally ruled out a run for President, although the odds of him becoming a candidate are viewed as long.

GOOD PICKUPS FOR RICK. The county attorney of the state's largest county heads the latest group of New Hampshire endorsements for Santorum, who's expected to formally announce his presidential candidacy in two weeks.

Hillsborough County Attorney Dennis Hogan is among three Nashua-based elected officials Santorum announced yesterday as members of his fledgling campaign team.

Also endorsing Santorum were state Reps. Bill Ohm and Kevin Brown.

Hogan, a long-time trial attorney and former chairman of the Nashua Republican City Committee, becomes the first county attorney to officially endorse a presidential candidate for the coming primary.

However, Rockingham County Attorney Jim Reams, who endorsed Mitt Romney in 2008, earlier this year hosted Ann Romney for an event at his home and is expected to endorse Romney again. Rockingham is the state's second-largest county.

Hogan last November defeated then-incumbent Democratic County Attorney Robert Walsh by 23,000 votes.

Hogan becomes one of the biggest names Santorum has picked up to date. County officers, such as county

commissioners, county attorneys, county treasurers and sheriffs, run grassroots-oriented campaigns and generally build closely-knit networks.

A member of a well-known GOP family in Nashua, Hogan is son of pro-life leader Dan Hogan.

Ohm, a retired business executive, is the former vice president and general manager of ADE Technologies.

Brown is a lifelong Nashua resident who is active in the NRA and American Red Cross.

A Santorum aide confirmed that Santorum will formally announce his decision on whether to run for President the week of June 5. And since Santorum has already accepted an invitation to participate in a New Hampshire presidential primary debate on June 13, it seems clear that his decision will be to become an official candidate.

ONE STOP "TPAW." Pawlenty isn't making a lot of time for the first-primary state during his announcement tour.

It's doubtful that Pawlenty is writing off the state already, but it's noteworthy that he plans only one public stop on his visit today.

It's no surprise that the former Minnesota governor formally announced his candidacy in neighboring Iowa, the first-caucus state where he must do well.

But he then went to Florida, a state which seems intent on breaking a national Republican rule addressing the caucus primary schedule, and yesterday he was in Washington, D.C., addressing the Cato Institute.

Today, Pawlenty will visit Cirtronics, an electronics products manufacturer in Milford. He'll take a tour and talk to employees. And then, he's out, and on his way to New York City for a speech on Wall Street.

Pollster Smith surmises that Pawlenty "seems to have made a decision that New Hampshire is not going to be the spot where he's going to take off."

That remains to be seen, but his level of attention to New Hampshire during his announcement week is interesting.

MORE RUDY DETAILS. Giuliani, still considering a run for President, will return to New Hampshire on June 2 and 3.

Giuliani supporter Wayne Semprini says Giuliani will attend a luncheon in North Conway hosted by Vito Marcello at his Bellini's Ristorante Italiano, followed by a fundraiser for the state Republican Party at GOP activist Dan Philbrick's Three River Farm in Dover. (Philbrick backed former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee in 2008).

Semprini said that on Friday, June 3, Giuliani will attend a private dinner with Manchester-area business people hosted by Steve Talarico, co-owner of Manchester Harley Davidson.

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CAIN IS IN. Conservative businessman and presidential hopeful Herman Cain says he will appear in the New Hampshire presidential debate on Monday, June 13.

Cain urged other Republican candidates to attend, saying, “Those of us who are serious about earning the trust and confidence of the voters will take part in this important event.”

The debate, co-sponsored by CNN, WMUR and the New Hampshire Union Leader, will be held at Saint Anselm College from 8 to 10 p.m.

Cain will next be in New Hampshire on Monday, May 30, and Tuesday, May 31.

On Monday morning, he will stop at Beantowne, a coffee shop in Hampstead, and then attend a Memorial Day observance in that town. On Tuesday, Cain will address the House Republican Alliance at the Legislative Office Building. He also has private lunches scheduled on Monday with business owners on the Seacoast and on Tuesday with restaurant owners in Concord.

And, as we've reported, Bachmann will be in the state on Monday, while Michigan U.S. Rep. Thaddeus McCotter will make his New Hampshire debut on June 3 aboard the M/S Mount Washington during the Belknap County Republican Committee's annual “Lincoln Day” cruise.

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