

Presidential Race Draws Even

GOP Base Getting Behind McCain

Overview

With less than two weeks to go before the start of the presidential nominating conventions, Barack Obama's lead over John McCain has disappeared. Pew's latest survey finds 46% of registered voters saying they favor or lean to the putative Democratic candidate, while 43% back his likely Republican rival. In late June, Obama held a comfortable 48%-to-40% margin over McCain, which narrowed in mid-July to 47% to 42%.

Two factors appear to be at play in shifting voter sentiment. First, McCain is garnering more support from his base - including Republicans and white evangelical Protestants - than he was in June, and he also has steadily gained backing from white working class voters over this period. Secondly and more generally, the Arizona senator has made gains on his leadership image. An even greater percentage of voters than in June now see McCain as the candidate who would use the best judgment in a crisis, and an increasing percentage see him as the candidate who can get things done.

Conversely, Obama has made little progress in increasing his support among core Democrats since June - currently 83% favor him compared with 87% of Republicans who back McCain. The likely Democratic nominee is still getting relatively modest support from Hillary Clinton's former supporters: 72% of them support Obama, compared with the 88% support level that McCain receives from backers of his formal GOP rivals. Obama's strong points with voters are in being seen as the candidate with new ideas and as someone who connects well with ordinary people.

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, was conducted by telephone - both landline phones and cell phones - from July 31-August 10 among 2,414 registered voters. It finds that race, gender and age are strong drivers of support in a closely divided electorate. Almost nine-in-ten African American voters (88%) back Obama, while McCain leads 51% to 39% among whites. Since June, McCain has gained support among men who now favor him by a 49%-to-41% margin. In contrast, women favor Obama by a roughly comparable margin of 51% to 38%. The Democratic candidate holds a 24 percentage-point lead over his rival among voters younger than age 30, whereas voters over age 50 are more evenly split (47% McCain, 42% Obama).

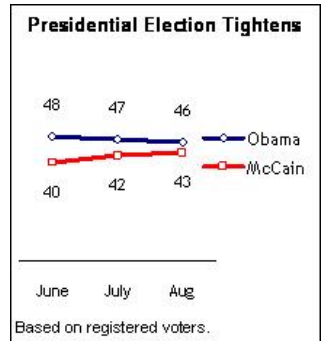
While Sen. McCain is attracting more support from Republicans than Sen. Obama is from Democrats, McCain's backers continue to be less enthusiastic about him than are Obama supporters about their candidate. Fewer than half of McCain's backers (39%) describe themselves as strong supporters of the Arizona senator, compared with 58% of Obama backers who say they support Obama strongly. The McCain supporters who back him "only moderately" are most troubled by his positions on economic issues, while Obama's soft supporters are most troubled by his personal abilities and experience.

As was the case in Pew's June and July surveys, one in three voters (33%) can be categorized as swing voters - of this group 12% lean to Obama. 11% lean to McCain and 10% are undecided.

McCain Makes Gains among GOP Base, White Working Class

The basic contours of the presidential race remain as they were earlier in the summer, but McCain currently enjoys slightly greater support among Republicans than he did two months ago (87% now, 82% in June), while Obama's support among Democrats is unchanged (83% now, 82% in June). The candidates remain essentially tied among independents (45% for Obama, 41% for McCain).

McCain leads among white evangelical Protestant voters, 68% to 24% for Obama. In June, McCain's lead was slightly smaller (61% to 25%). The candidates remain virtually tied among a crucial swing voter group, white non-Hispanic Catholics (44% Obama, 45% McCain).



McCain Strengthens Leadership Image		
Which candidate...	Jun %	Aug %
<i>Would use good judgment in a crisis</i>		
McCain	47	51
Obama	38	36
McCain advantage	+9	+15
<i>Is willing to take unpopular stands</i>		
McCain	44	49
Obama	41	38
McCain advantage	+3	+11
<i>Can get things done</i>		
McCain	37	42
Obama	43	40
McCain advantage	-6	+2
But Still Trails in Strong Support		
<i>Support Obama...</i>		
Strongly	28	27
Only moderately	19	19
<i>Support McCain</i>		
Strongly	14	17
Only moderately	26	26

Based on registered voters.

Obama retains a very solid lead among young voters, topping McCain by 58% to 34% among those younger than age 30, about the same as in June. But he no longer has a clear lead among those ages 30-49, which he did in June. Among voters age 50 and older, the candidates are separated by only five points, with McCain holding a slight edge.

McCain now holds a significant 49%-to-41% lead among men, a group he split with Obama in June. Obama leads among women, 51% to 38%, nearly identical to his showing in June.

McCain continues to lead among white voters overall, and has made gains over the past two months among both whites living in the South and those who have not attended college. White southerners now favor McCain by a margin of 29 points, 60% to 31%. Two months ago, his advantage was 17 points (53% to 36%). In June, McCain led among whites with no more than a high school education by a modest 6 points, 45% to 39%. He now leads by nearly 20 points among this group (53% to 34%). McCain also leads Obama among white voters who have some college experience but do not have a four-year degree (53% for McCain, 39% for Obama). The two candidates are tied among white college graduates (46% each).

	June		August		June-Aug McCain change	Aug N
	Obama %	McCain %	Obama %	McCain %		
All white voters	40	48	39	51	+3	1965
Republicans	9	83	7	88	+5	700
Democrats	77	13	78	14	+1	577
Independents	39	43	40	45	+2	627
Men	36	53	35	55	+2	982
Women	43	43	43	46	+3	983
College grad	41	50	46	46	-4	842
Some college	39	49	39	53	+4	500
HS or less	39	45	34	53	+8	617
\$75,000+	39	52	38	56	+4	684
\$50-\$74,999	48	45	40	54	+9	353
\$30-\$49,999	39	54	39	49	-5	327
Under \$30,000	41	39	43	44	+5	373
18-29	49	44	51	41	-3	178
30-49	41	48	38	52	+4	595
50-64	38	48	36	54	+6	682
65+	33	50	37	50	0	490
Northeast	41	44	46	42	-2	351
South	36	53	31	60	+7	712
Midwest	40	46	42	46	0	518
West	46	45	44	47	+2	384

Based on white registered voters. Figures read horizontally.

18-29	56	36	58	34	-2	254
30-49	52	39	47	43	+4	760
50-64	45	42	43	46	+4	805
65+	37	44	42	46	+2	554
College grad+	46	44	49	42	-2	990
Some college	48	41	47	45	+4	630
HS or less	49	36	45	43	+7	769
\$75,000+	43	47	42	52	+5	808
\$50-\$74,999	54	39	47	47	+8	416
\$30-\$49,999	48	45	48	40	-5	412
Less than \$30,000	56	29	53	35	+6	492
Protestant	44	45	42	49	+4	1364
White evangelical	25	61	24	68	+7	576
White mainline	39	53	39	50	-3	501
Black Protestant	90	2	88	6	+4	186
Catholic	44	42	47	42	0	548
White, non-Hisp	40	46	44	45	-1	440
Unaffiliated	67	24	59	27	+3	282

Based on registered voters. Figures read horizontally.

Candidate Support in 2008 Compared with 2004 and 2002

McCain's overall lead over Obama among white registered voters (51% to 39%) is comparable to the advantage held by Bush over his Democratic opponents in 2000 (52% to 41% over Al Gore) and in 2004 (50% to 42% over John Kerry) at similar points in the campaign. And many of the demographic differences seen in previous elections continue to hold today - white voters who are evangelical Protestants, who have higher incomes, and who live in the South are among the strongest backers of John McCain, as they were of George W. Bush in his presidential elections.

But unlike the 2000 and 2004 elections, age and education are strongly related to the vote choice of whites this year. A slim majority (51%) of whites younger than age 30 favor Obama in the current survey, while McCain is leading by a wide margin among those ages 30 and older. In the summers of 2000 and 2004, George W. Bush ran at least as strongly among younger whites as he did among older whites. Similarly, Barack Obama garners substantially more support from college-educated whites than he does among those who never attended college - there was no difference between high- and low-education white voters in the past two elections.

	2000		2004		2008		2008 N
	Gore %	Bush %	Kerry %	Bush %	Obama %	McCain %	
Total Whites	41	52	42	50	39	51	1965
Men	36	57	39	53	35	55	982
Women	45	47	44	48	43	46	983
18-29	38	56	41	49	51	41	178
30-49	39	54	38	55	38	52	595
50-64	44	49	45	48	36	54	682
65+	41	50	44	46	37	50	490
College grad+	41	52	45	50	46	46	842
Some college	38	56	37	55	39	53	500
HS or less	41	49	42	48	34	53	617
\$75,000+	37	59	38	57	38	56	684
\$50-\$74,999	39	57	38	57	40	54	353
\$30-\$49,999	39	55	42	52	39	49	327
Under \$30,000	48	44	51	36	43	44	373
Northeast	42	49	44	48	46	42	351
South	36	57	36	56	31	60	712
Midwest	42	51	45	46	42	46	518
West	45	48	44	48	44	47	384
White Protestant	36	57	33	59	31	60	1080
Mainline	43	49	43	48	39	50	501
Evangelical	28	66	25	68	24	68	576
Non-Hispanic Catholic	44	49	45	47	44	44	440
Unaffiliated	50	42	65	29	56	32	233
Republican	9	88	4	94	7	88	700
Democrat	79	16	89	8	78	14	577
Independent	39	51	45	38	40	45	627

*Surveys from June/July 2000, July/August 2004, and August 2008. In 2004, the horserace question included Ralph Nader.
Based on white registered voters.

Swing Vote Remains Large

As was the case in June and July, one-in-three registered voters are swing voters, meaning that they either offer no initial candidate preference or say they might still change their mind. Currently, 35% of voters say they back Obama and have definitely decided not to vote for John McCain, 32% favor McCain and have definitely decided not to vote for Obama. Among independents, fully 46% fall into this swing voter category.

Primary Divisions Continue for Democrats

While 72% of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters who backed Hillary Clinton for the party's nomination say they will support Barack Obama this fall, a significant number of holdouts remain. Among the 28% who say they will not support Obama on November 4th, 18% say they will support McCain, 7% don't yet know who they will support and 3% plan to back another candidate.

The Obama campaign has made no significant headway among former Clinton backers over the past two months. The voting preferences of Clinton's supporters are virtually identical to earlier polls in June and July.

By comparison, fully 88% of Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters who backed a candidate other than John McCain for the GOP nomination say they will support McCain this fall. Just 6% favor Obama. Support for McCain in the general election has consistently been just as strong among Republicans who didn't back him for the nomination as it is among those who did. By contrast, among Democrats, Clinton's primary supporters are 21 points less likely than Obama's primary supporters to back Obama in the general election (72% vs. 93%).

Despite these internal divisions, Barack Obama continues to have substantially more strong supporters in the general election than does John McCain. Overall, 27% of registered voters describe themselves as supporting Obama strongly, while just 17% say they back McCain strongly. This imbalance is driven by the overwhelming enthusiasm for Obama from those who backed him in the primaries.

McCain Strengthens Leadership Image

By a two-to-one margin (54% to 27%) voters say the phrase "personally

Swing Voters: One In Three Remain In Play

	June %	July %	Aug %
Obama, no chance McCain	38	35	35
McCain, no chance Obama	29	31	32
Swing voters	33	34	33
Lean Obama/Chance McCain	10	12	12
Lean McCain/Chance Obama	11	11	11
Undecided	12	11	10
	100	100	100

Swing voters are those who express no preference between the two major candidates, those who only "lean" toward a candidate, and those who favor one candidate but say there is still a chance they might vote for the other leading candidate.

Some Clinton Primary Supporters Not Yet On Board

Supported...	June %	July %	Aug %
Barack Obama			
Obama	91	92	93
McCain	5	5	3
Other/DK	4	3	4
	100	100	100
Hillary Clinton			
Obama	69	72	72
McCain	17	17	18
Other/DK	14	11	10
	100	100	100
N Clinton supporters	333	294	475
N Obama supporters	401	288	583

Based on Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters.

Republicans Who Backed Others in Primary More Loyal

Supported...	June %	July %	Aug %
John McCain			
Obama	9	9	8
McCain	82	85	88
Other/DK	9	6	4
	100	100	100

qualified to be president" better describes McCain, virtually unchanged from June. Voters also continue to see McCain as the candidate who is most likely to use good judgment in a crisis, and the GOP candidate also now holds an advantage over his opponent on other key leadership traits. Meanwhile, Obama's greatest advantage is being seen as the candidate who has new ideas and who connects well with ordinary people.

N McCain supporters 236 216 426
 N other supporters 403 256 558

Based on Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters.

McCain Advantage on the Leadership Dimension				
<i>Trait better describes...</i>	McCain	Obama	(VOL) Both/	
			Neither	DK
	%	%	%	%
Personally qualified				
August 2008	54	27	15	4=100
June 2008	55	27	13	5=100
Good judgment in crisis				
August 2008	51	36	8	5=100
June 2008	47	38	8	7=100
Willing to take a stand				
August 2008	49	38	8	5=100
June 2008	44	41	10	5=100
Can get things done				
August 2008	42	40	11	7=100
June 2008	37	43	12	8=100

Based on registered voters.

The percentage of voters citing McCain as the candidate who "would use good judgment in a crisis" and as the candidate who "can get things done" has increased significantly since June. More than half of voters (51%) now say McCain would use good judgment while 36% say the phrase better describes Obama; in June, McCain held a narrower 9-point advantage. Opinions about which candidate can get things done are nearly evenly divided (42% name McCain and 40% name Obama); in June, Obama held a slight edge (43% to 37%).

McCain has also improved his advantage as the candidate who is "willing to take a stand, even if it's unpopular." Nearly half of voters say this phrase better describes the Republican candidate (48%), compared with 38% who say it better describes his Democratic opponent. In June, voters were about as likely to name McCain (44%) as they were to name Obama (41%).

While McCain has made considerable gains relative to Obama in some areas, voters continue to say Obama is the candidate who has new ideas (69% to 17%), connects well with ordinary people (57% to 30%) and shares their values (47% to 39%). In addition, voters are much more likely to see McCain as "a typical politician" - about half (49%) say this phrase better describes McCain and 31% say it better describes Obama, virtually unchanged from June.

As was the case in June, voters are nearly evenly divided on whether the phrase "honest and truthful" better describes McCain or Obama. About four-in-ten (39%) see McCain as the more honest candidate and 36% name Obama.

Obama Advantage on the Personal Dimension				
<i>Trait better describes...</i>	McCain	Obama	(VOL) Both/	
			Neither	DK
	%	%	%	%
Has new ideas				
August 2008	17	69	10	4=100
June 2008	12	74	10	4=100
Connects well w/ people				
August 2008	30	57	9	4=100
June 2008	26	58	10	6=100
Typical politician				
August 2008	49	31	16	4=100
June 2008	50	30	16	4=100
Shares my values				
August 2008	39	47	9	5=100
June 2008	38	44	12	6=100

Based on registered voters.

What "Troubles" Voters About the Candidates?

When asked to pick what troubles them most about Barack Obama, about a third of McCain backers (34%) say his personal abilities and experience. But a substantial number - adding to a majority overall - cite Obama's positions on either foreign policy issues (22%), economic issues (15%) or social and moral issues (16%) as the most troubling thing about him.

Not surprisingly, Obama's policy positions trouble far fewer of his own backers, but worries about his personal abilities and experiences are just as widespread. Overall, 32% of Obama backers say this is what troubles them most about Obama. Among those who say they back Obama "only moderately" rather than strongly, fully 43% cite Obama's personal abilities and experiences as what troubles them most.

	What Troubles You Most About Barack Obama?			
	Support McCain	---Support Obama---		
		Total	Strongly	Not strongly
	%	%	%	%
Personal abilities & experiences	34	32	24	43
Foreign policy positions	22	16	16	17
Economic positions	15	11	9	13
Social & moral positions	16	7	5	8
None/Nothing	5	28	41	12
DK	8	6	5	7
	100	100	100	100

Based on registered voters.

When it comes to John McCain, concerns are focused almost entirely on his policy positions - fewer than one-in-ten voters (9%) cite his personal

abilities and experiences as the most troubling. Obama's supporters are most widely troubled by McCain's positions on foreign policy issues (33%) followed by his positions on economic issues (26%). The reverse is true among McCain's own backers, where McCain's economic positions (28%) are cited far more often than his foreign policy positions (16%). Those who back McCain "only moderately" are the most likely to cite his economic positions as what troubles them most (32%).

	Support	---Support McCain---		
	Obama	Total	Strongly	Not strongly
	%	%	%	%
Foreign policy positions	33	16	13	18
Economic positions	26	28	23	32
Social & moral positions	12	16	12	18
Personal abilities & experiences	10	8	7	8
None/Nothing	9	26	40	17
Don't know	10	6	5	7
	100	100	100	100

Based on registered voters.

What Voters Like about the Candidates

Another area of distinction lies in what voters say they "like most" about the two candidates. For John McCain, his personal abilities and experiences stand out as the most liked trait among both his backers (46%) and Obama's backers (37%). A plurality of Obama's supporters (36%) say that his positions on economic issues are what they like most about him, followed by his positions on social and moral issues (23%). Relatively few Obama supporters (17%) cite his personal abilities and experiences as what they like most - nearly twice as many (32%) cite this as what troubles them most about Obama. And while foreign policy is what troubles Obama supporters most about McCain, it does not stand out as a particular strength for Obama - just 14% of Obama supporters say this is what they like most about him.

While most Obama supporters can cite something that they "like most" about John McCain - with his personal abilities and experiences topping the list - a majority of McCain supporters (53%) say that they don't like Obama on any of these fronts.

	Support	Support
	Obama	McCain
	%	%
Barack Obama		
Economic positions	36	13
Social & moral positions	23	11
Personal abilities & experiences	17	11
Foreign policy positions	14	5
None/Nothing	4	53
Don't know	6	7
	100	100
	Support	Support
	McCain	Obama
	%	%
John McCain		
Personal abilities & experiences	46	37
Foreign policy positions	26	8
Economic positions	12	8
Social & moral positions	10	7
None/Nothing	3	34
Don't know	3	6
	100	100

Based on registered voters.