



By Susan Page, USA TODAY

Barack Obama's national standing has been significantly damaged by the controversy over his former pastor, a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll finds, raising questions for some voters about the Illinois senator's values, credibility and electability.

The erosion of support among Democrats and independents raises the stakes in Tuesday's Indiana and North Carolina primaries, which represent a chance for Obama to reassert his claim to a Democratic nomination that seems nearly in his grasp. A defeat in Indiana and a close finish in North Carolina, where he's favored, could fuel unease about his ability to win in November. Such results also could help propel Hillary Rodham Clinton's uphill campaign all the way to the Democratic convention in August.

In the USA TODAY survey, taken Thursday through Saturday, Clinton leads Obama among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents by 7 percentage points, the first time in three months she has been ahead. Two weeks ago, before the controversy over comments by Jeremiah Wright reignited, Obama led by 10 points.

In February, Democrats and Democratic leaners by 33 points said Obama had a better shot at beating Republican John McCain in November. Clinton is now seen as the stronger candidate by 5 points.

"That's a huge issue; I mean, John McCain is not going to be a pushover," says Ed Cote, an uncommitted superdelegate from Washington state. The Wright firestorm is "worrisome because it's created a lot of footage for people to make hit ads — ammunition for the Republicans."

Obama acknowledged Sunday that Wright's recent remarks — namely the pastor's suggestions that U.S. actions had invited the Sept. 11 attacks and that the American government could have been behind the spread of AIDS in urban areas — had been an unwelcome distraction in the days leading up to yet another critical set of contests.

"We ended up spending a lot of time talking about Rev. Wright instead of talking about gas prices and food prices and the situation in Iraq," Obama said on NBC's *Meet the Press*. "Hopefully, we've been able to put it behind us."

On ABC's *This Week*, Clinton said the contest would continue through the final June 3 primaries. Then, "people can look at all of the various factors and decide who would be the strongest candidate."

The furor over Wright won't necessarily cost Obama the nomination; Obama continues to hold an almost insurmountable lead in pledged delegates. But it hasn't helped his efforts to gain endorsements from uncommitted party leaders known as superdelegates to get the 2,025 total delegates he needs.

The controversy also could be a hurdle if Obama wins the nomination and then tries to draw support from independent and GOP voters in November.

"It will be a continuing problem," predicts Joe Trippi, a strategist for John Edwards' presidential bid who isn't affiliated with one of the current campaigns. "This won't be the last time it's raised."

The ties that bind — and cost

One-third of likely voters say Obama's ties to Wright make them less likely to vote for him. But Obama isn't the only candidate with divisive connections: One-third of likely voters say Clinton's association with Bill

Clinton, her husband and the former president, makes them less likely to support her.

Meanwhile, 38% say McCain's link to President Bush makes them less likely to vote for him.

However, there's also an upside to the question for Clinton and McCain. Hillary Clinton's ties to her husband make 18% of Americans more likely to support her, and McCain's ties to Bush make 7% more likely to vote for the Arizona senator. Just 1% of likely voters say Obama's links to Wright make them more likely to support him.

The survey makes it clear the Wright controversy has grabbed public attention. Eight of 10 Americans have been following it, most of them closely.

"Anytime you have a situation where it changes the focus of the race from instead of talking about the economy it gets to talking about something else — it does change the dynamic," says Nathan Smith, an uncommitted superdelegate from Kentucky.

As to how much difference it makes, Smith says, "Tuesday is where you'll find that out."

An initial furor over quotes from sermons Wright had given over decades led Obama to deliver a speech on race relations in March. In it, he distanced himself from Wright's words but said he could not "disown" the pastor.

Wright's defiant appearance April 28 at the National Press Club in Washington renewed the controversy. The next day, Obama broke ties with the minister who had married him and his wife and baptized their two daughters.

On Sunday, Obama defended his decision to avoid a full rupture with Wright until the pastor had "put some gasoline on the fire" last week. Asked what he'd learned, Obama replied, "When you're in national politics, it's always good to pull the Band-Aid off quick."

Jerry Meek, the Democratic state chairman in North Carolina, says Obama didn't seem to immediately recognize how potent the issue was becoming.

"I think he was initially slow to appreciate the significance of it, but he finally in the last couple of days addressed it emphatically," Meek says. The impact on the Tar Heel State primary is a "big question," he says. "It is something people are talking about."

The Wright controversy has been especially problematic for Obama's campaign because it has helped shape Americans' emerging assessments of the candidate. In the USA TODAY survey:

- Obama's unfavorable rating climbs to a new high, 37%. His negative rating among independents, usually the swing voters in national elections, jumped from 27% in February to 36% now.

Even so, Obama's favorable-unfavorable rating of 58%-37% remains more positive than Clinton's 52%-45%. McCain's standing is the strongest of all: 62% favorable-30% unfavorable.

- One in four Americans who are following the controversy say their "best guess" is that Obama agrees with Wright's views, even though the senator has said repeatedly he finds them offensive and wrong.

- Obama has lost the 8-point advantage he held over Clinton in February as someone who "shares your values." Clinton has a 5-point edge among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents.

The one measure on which Obama continues to hold an edge over Clinton is as someone whom Americans

see as honest and trustworthy. He had a 13-point advantage in February, a 14-point edge now. "Through some weeks when the news has hardly been all positive" for Obama, "it's clear that voters trust" him, campaign spokesman Bill Burton says. "And we remain ahead in the most important measure in the Democratic nomination race, the race for delegates."

According to the Associated Press, Obama has 1,742½ delegates, Clinton 1,607½. In the national survey, Clinton now leads the Democratic presidential contest, 51%-44%, a reversal from two weeks ago. Obama's standing among Democrats and Democratic leaners has dropped 6 points; Clinton's is up 11.

However, those findings differ from a separate Gallup tracking poll of voters, which shows Obama with a narrow lead, 49%-45%. The daily tracking poll has a margin of error of +/-3 points; the USA TODAY poll's margin of error is +/-5 points.

The two surveys were taken over the same days, but the tracking poll includes more interviews and a higher proportion of interviews taken on Saturday. It reflects the views of those seen as likely voters; the USA TODAY results include all Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents who were called.

In addition, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll released Sunday showed Obama rebounding, leading Clinton by 12 points among Democratic primary voters. The CBS survey of 671 adults included 283 Democratic primary voters. The USA TODAY poll of 1,019 adults included 516 Democrats and independents leaning Democratic. The tracking poll of 4,402 adults included 1,267 Democrats.

A right to 'kick the tires'

Obama said the scrutiny he's faced on the Wright controversy was fair. When you're running for president, he said, "I think people have a right to lift the hood and kick the tires."

Some African-American leaders disagree, and in the survey perspectives on that question divide sharply by race. Whites split about evenly over whether or not the Wright debate was "a meaningful reflection on Obama's character and judgment that should be discussed in the campaign." Blacks by 4-1 said it shouldn't be part of the campaign.

"It's simply what I would call a white double standard," says Raymond Winbush, an ally of Wright and director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University, a historically black college in Baltimore. Wright himself declined to comment.

"The American people did not ask Mitt Romney to step down from the Mormon Church" because of controversies over doctrine, Winbush said. "We didn't ask Rudy Giuliani to disavow the Catholic Church."

Some black leaders see the matter as an effort to inject race into the campaign.

"I know what it is to be a candidate who happens to be African-American trying to serve all of the people" and to lose in a campaign that emphasizes race, says Harvey Gantt, the first black mayor of Charlotte. He lost bids in 1990 and 1996 to unseat Republican Sen. Jesse Helms after the GOP aired ads on the sensitive topic of affirmative action.

Gantt says the focus on Wright is "designed to suggest that maybe Barack Obama is not the cool, reasoned individual that he portrays himself to be, that he really is some angry black man who harbors ill will toward America."

Still, Gantt says he's confident that things have changed. "We've come a long way in 18 years," he says. "I suspect the North Carolina of 1990 is not the North Carolina of today."

A showdown in Denver?

The long Democratic campaign may be taking a toll on both contenders. Both Democrats saw their standing wane a bit against McCain, though the shifts are within the polls' margins of error. McCain leads Clinton by 3 points in a head-to-head match-up, and leads Obama by 1. The Gallup tracking poll has McCain up by 1 point over Clinton, 5 points over Obama.

Even so, most Democratic voters are happy to see the contest between Obama and Clinton go on. One in four say Clinton should concede and one in seven say Obama should do so, but 60% say both should continue to campaign.

They say uncommitted superdelegates should take their time, too. One in four voters say such delegates should make their decision soon after Tuesday's primaries, but nearly half say they should wait until all the primaries are over. One in four say they should wait until the convention.

"I guess the best I can say is I'm taking in all the news and the actions of the candidates," says Cynthia Nunley, an uncommitted superdelegate from Wyoming who plans to decide in June. "I can't begin to guess what kinds of things are going to happen in the next month and a half."

Contributing: Kathy Kiely

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.