

OBAMA STILL RUNNING THIRD AMONG REPUBLICANS?

There's been some hand-wringing among Democrats about the New Year's Eve Des Moines Register poll, which showed Obama polling 32% of the vote with strong support from a surprising (and arguably unrealistic) number of Independents participating in the caucus. The WaPo did an entire article suggesting Obama may win the caucus because he's got cross-over appeal.

The senator from Illinois received a jolt of momentum late New Year's Eve, when the Des Moines Register's final Iowa poll showed him leading Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) by 32 percent to 25 percent, with former senator John Edwards (N.C.) at 24 percent. But just as striking were two findings that suggest Obama may be succeeding at one of the riskiest gambits of his Iowa campaign, an aggressive push to persuade non-Democrats to participate.

The survey found that more newcomers than regular participants could turn out on Thursday: Overall, 40 percent of likely Democratic caucusgoers identified themselves as independents, the poll said, double the percentage from 2004, and 60 percent said they would be attending a caucus for the first time. Both groups preferred Obama.

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Chief Clinton strategist Mark Penn disputed the poll, calling the Register's turnout model "unprecedented" and "out of sync with other polling done in the race," including several recent surveys that showed a statistical dead heat. Edwards spokesman Eric Schultz

called the Register model "at odds with history."

And folks in left blogtopia (h/t Skippy) now wonder whether, if Obama succeeds, it will constitute a sabotage of the Democratic process.

Perhaps it's because I live in Michigan, where in 2000 a bunch of Democrats voted in the Republican primary to keep McCain in the Republican primary for another couple of days, and where the NRA played a significant role in giving John Dingell the win over Lynn Rivers in a heated 2002 might-as-well-be-the-General-election primary battle. But I'm not so bugged about Independents and even Republicans crossing over to vote in Iowa's Democratic caucuses. In the case of Iowa, if they're willing to give up what would be more significant input into the Republican nomination to vote for Obama, so be it.

I think there's fairly compelling evidence that whatever Independents and Republicans caucus for Obama tomorrow night are casting a vote for Obama and not necessarily for chaos in the Democratic nomination. Recall, for example, the July-August poll that showed Obama polling third among Republicans.

In late July and early August, Iowa Republican voters were asked to name their choice for president in a University of Iowa poll. Mitt Romney, who leads most Iowa surveys, got 22 percent of the total. Rudy Giuliani came in second with 10 percent. But third place went to a Democrat, Barack Obama, who got nearly 7 percent – more than Mike Huckabee, John McCain and Sam Brownback combined.

Not to worry: The Obama campaign isn't likely to join the Grand Old Party, and pollsters are convinced that Obama has exactly zero chance of winning the Republican caucus in Iowa. But something

is going on. "I don't want to make too much of it," says David Redlawsk, the professor who commissioned the poll. "But I do think that the message Obama is putting out right now is the most likely to reach across party lines."

The numbers from the Des Moines Register poll (showing 5% of likely Democratic caucus-goers to be Republicans) seem fairly realistic when matched against Obama's 7% support among Republicans in August. And when you consider that, during the same time frame when Obama was polling third among Republicans, the leading GOP candidate was "none of the above." This is going to be a weird primary season, because there simply isn't a GOP candidate who can carry off what Bush did in 2000, uniting (in however cosmetic a fashion) all the disparate ideologies among Republicans. Every single GOP candidate will, for some reason, offend an important Republican constituency. Which means Republicans probably still largely prefer "none of the above" to anyone they've currently got running.

That said, I'm not sure Obama's efforts to go for Independents will succeed. Penn and Schultz are right in saying the DMR poll defies all recent history. Obama's depending on turning out youth, first-timers, and Independents to vote for him, which people often try to do in Iowa but few succeed, particularly not when caucus night looks like it'll feature sub-zero wind chills.

But the whole Democratic primary (which may well go on for several weeks, given the three-way tie we've apparently got now) is going to be significantly impacted by the fact that a lot of people hate Republicans and even those who like Republicans in theory don't like these Republicans.