

Poll says Texans favor GOP candidates

By Brandi Grissom / Austin Bureau
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AUSTIN -- Texas still favors GOP candidates at the top of the ballot, according to statewide poll data released Thursday, but Democrats are gaining ground in the red state.

GOP U.S. Sen. John McCain held an advantage in the presidential race, and incumbent U.S. Sen. John Cornyn had a small edge over his Democratic challenger, state Rep. Rick Noriega, D-Houston, according to a poll taken this month by the nonpartisan group The Texas Lyceum.

Pollster Daron Shaw, a government professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said the small margins favoring the Republicans, however, indicated higher-than-usual enthusiasm among Democrats.

"Republicans typically have a party identification edge over the Democrats on election day," Shaw said. "The Democrats need to maintain this greater intensity to be competitive in 2008."

University of Texas at El Paso political science professor Greg Rocha said Democratic presidential candidate U.S. Sen. Barack Obama seems to be helping the party gain momentum in the Lone Star state.

"The Democrats this time seem to be pretty enthused, and maybe the Democratic Party's kind of slowly turning around here," he said.

The Lyceum poll surveyed 500 likely Texas voters, with about half identifying themselves as Republicans and half as Democrats. The margin of error in the poll was 3 percentage points. Shaw said the poll may not accurately reflect the makeup of Texas' voting population which typically includes more Republicans.

Forty-three percent of the voters said they would support McCain and 38 percent chose Obama.

David Thackston, a Republican from Northeast El Paso, said McCain would win Texas because he has conservative values that align with many voters including Democrats and independents.

"He is a veteran and somebody with military background that I think we're going to need in the next presidency," Thackston said.

El Paso Democrat Jim Scherr said voters would more likely support Obama in November.

"Americans are fed up with \$4-a-gallon gas, body bags from Iraq without an end in sight and a teetering economy," Scherr said. "Americans are ready for change."

In the Texas U.S. Senate race, the poll showed incumbent Cornyn leading his Democratic challenger by just two percentage points, 38 percent compared with 36 percent.

Pamela Perez, an independent voter from Northeast El Paso, said she wasn't familiar yet with Noriega but would probably vote for him in November. "It's probably better than what we have now," she said.

The wide-ranging Lyceum poll also asked what issues respondents thought were the most important facing the nation.

More than a third listed the economy, and 20 percent said rising gas and energy prices.

The poll also showed that Texans are uneasy about the direction of the country, with more than three-quarters of those polled saying the country is worse off today than it was a year ago.

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To view The Texas Lyceum poll, go to <http://www.texaslyceum.org/pollpage.aspx>