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Poll Examines Voter Issues in New Hampshire Primary

For more information, contact Andrew Smith, UNH Survey Center, at 603-862-4367. Results also will be available online at: www.unh.edu/ipssr/survey-center/index.html

By *Tracy Manforte*
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- New Hampshire voters want candidates in the New Hampshire Primary to address education, Social Security and health care. The issues which voters say are most likely to affect their votes are health care and campaign finance reform.

These findings are based on the latest **WMUR / CNN Poll**, conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center. The WMUR / CNN Poll is sponsored by WMUR - TV, Channel 9 in Manchester, and CNN.

Education Tops List of Issues

New Hampshire has endured a two-year debate over how to fund public education, and this concern over education funding has spilled over into the New Hampshire primary. When asked about the issues that candidates in the 2000 primary need to address, 20 percent of New Hampshire voters cite education.

Other issues which New Hampshire voters think candidates should address include funding of Social Security and Medicare (11 percent) and dealing with the cost of health care (11 percent). In May, 8 percent of New Hampshire likely voters cited some aspect of Social Security or Medicare while only 4 percent cited the cost of health care.

High taxes remains a concern of 7 percent of New Hampshire likely voters, up from 4 percent who cited taxes in May. Voters should not be surprised to hear presidential candidates concentrate on ways to improve education, protect Social Security and Medicare, reduce the cost of health care, all without raising taxes, in their campaign stops.

Moral issues are important to many New Hampshire voters -- 5 percent mention a need for honesty and integrity in government, 4 percent cite a general lack of morality in America, and 1 percent mention family breakdowns and a decline of family values as the most

important issues for candidates in the 2000 primary to address.

Crime and violence are also on the minds of New Hampshire voters -- 5 percent cite crime, violence, or drugs, and another 2 percent cite violence in schools as the problems candidates in the 2000 primary should address.

Impact of Issues on Primary Vote

To determine the impact of issues on voting, likely voters were read a series of issue positions which candidates in the 2000 primary might hold and asked if they would be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate who holds that position. New Hampshire voters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate ... who favors a plan to provide health care for all Americans (67 percent), who favors limiting campaign contributions (64 percent), who favors stricter gun control (61 percent), who favors spending the Federal budget surplus on Social Security and Medicare (50 percent), who favors the GOP tax cut plan (44 percent), who favors affirmative action (36 percent), and who has served in the military (35 percent). Voters are likely to vote against candidates who favor banning abortions (54 percent) or who have used illegal drugs in their teens and 20s (14 percent).

Health Care Reform

The best way to attract voters is to propose a credible plan to provide health care to all Americans. 67 percent of likely primary voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who holds this position, 15 percent say they would be less likely to vote against a candidate who holds this position, and 17 percent say it would make little difference in their vote. But don't look for voters to see detailed health care reform proposals slipped under their doors just yet. Candidates undoubtedly remember the health care reform debacle of 1993-1994 and will handle this delicate issue with kid gloves.

Health care reform is likely to be more prominent in the Democratic primary as 88 percent of Democratic primary voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate with a plan to provide health care to all Americans. In the GOP primary, supporters of John McCain are also much more likely to vote for a candidate who favors this position than are supporters of other Republican candidates.

Campaign Finance Reform

Several candidates, most notably Republican John McCain and Democrat Bill Bradley, have been pushing the issue of campaign finance reform and this may prove fruitful in New Hampshire. Sixty-four percent of likely New Hampshire primary voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who wants to limit the amount of money that individuals, companies, and other organizations can give to a candidate for their election, whereas only 11 percent say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who held this position, and 26 percent say that this would make little difference in their vote. Democrats are somewhat more likely than Republicans to say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors campaign finance reform, yet majorities in both parties say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors campaign finance reform. John McCain benefits most among Republican candidates from his position in favor of campaign finance reform -- 77 percent of McCain voters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors campaign finance reform.

Gun Control

In the wake of shootings in Littleton, Colorado, and Los Angeles, the issue of stricter gun control has risen in importance among New Hampshire primary voters. Currently, 61 percent of New Hampshire likely voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who favors stricter laws on the sale and purchase of handguns, 20 percent are more likely to vote against a candidate who holds this position, and 19 percent say it would make little difference in their vote. Democrats and Liberals are most likely to support a candidate who favors stricter gun control.

Elizabeth Dole shocked many Granite State Republicans this spring by coming out in favor of stricter control of handguns. While this position does not resonate with most Republicans, Dole supporters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors stricter gun control than are supporters of other Republican candidates.

Social Security and Medicare or Tax Cuts?

Recently, there has been considerable debate in Washington about how to use the future federal budget surplus. President Clinton and the Democratic Party have advocated using it to fund Social Security and Medicare while Republicans in Congress have proposed giving it back to voters as tax cuts.

New Hampshire voters are divided on this issue as well. Overall, 50 percent of New Hampshire likely voters say

they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors using the surplus to fund Social Security and Medicare, 27 percent say they are more likely to vote against a candidate with this position, and 23 percent say it will make little difference in their vote. Turning to tax cuts, 44 percent of likely voters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors the GOP tax cut plan, 33 percent are more likely to vote against a candidate with this position, and 23 percent say it will make little difference in their vote.

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is another issue which divides New Hampshire voters. Thirty-six percent of New Hampshire voters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors affirmative action for women and minorities, 28 percent say they are more likely to vote against a candidate who favors affirmative action, and 36 percent say it makes little difference in their vote.

Democrats are much more likely to say they will vote for a candidate who favors affirmative action than are Republicans or Independents. Fifty-three percent of Democrats say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors affirmative action, while 37 percent of Independents, and only 22 percent of Republicans say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors affirmative action.

Abortion

The Republican Party platform has long contained a plank which calls for a constitutional amendment banning most abortions. However, 54 percent of New Hampshire voters say they are more likely to vote against a candidate who favors banning abortions, 22 percent say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who holds that position, and 24 percent say it will make little difference. Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to vote against a candidate who favors banning abortions -- 68 percent to 41 percent.

Abortion is indeed dividing the Republican Party in New Hampshire, but most GOP primary voters are shying away from candidates who strongly press the abortion issue. Among the candidates who are leading in the GOP race, 42 percent of Bush supporters, 53 percent of Dole supporters, 56 percent of McCain supporters, and 36 percent of Forbes supporters say they are more likely to vote against a candidate who favors banning abortions.

Personal Traits

Texas Governor George W. Bush recently has undergone intense media scrutiny for alleged past drug use and Vice President Al Gore and Senator Bill Bradley have admitted to past marijuana use. The drug issue has not had much impact on New Hampshire voters and is not likely to have much impact on the campaign. Eighty-three percent of New Hampshire voters say that a candidate's use of illegal drugs in his teens and twenties will make little difference in their vote, 14 percent say past drug use will make them more likely to vote against a candidate, and 3 percent say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who has used drugs in the past.

These findings are based on the most recent WMUR / CNN Poll conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center from September 5 through September 11, 1999. A random sample of 702 likely New Hampshire Primary voters was interviewed by telephone. In 95 of 100 cases, the statewide estimates will be accurate to plus or minus 3.7 percent. Results reported for other subgroups have potential for somewhat larger variation than those for the entire population.

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