

Democrats, Republicans optimistic about poll results

2004-03-01

By Michael Baker
The Oklahoman

President Bush would carry Oklahoma if the election were held now, but Republicans face a tougher challenge to retain the seat being vacated by U.S. Sen. Don Nickles, according to a recent opinion poll.

Oklahoma opinion poll

The Oklahoman poll was administered by Wilson Research Strategies Inc., questioned 300 registered voters and has a 5.7 percent margin of error.

The characteristics of those polled reflect those of registered Oklahoma voters, polling company Chief Executive Officer Chris Wilson said.

Those polled were:

54 percent Democrat, 37 percent Republican and 8 percent independent.

82 percent white, 6 percent black, 6 percent American Indian and 4 percent Hispanic.

52 percent female.

Most respondents were ages 50 to 62 (36 percent), followed by those older than 62 (30 percent), ages 35 to 49 (23 percent) and ages 18 to 34 (7 percent).

Most respondents lived in northeast Oklahoma (40

The Feb. 16-19 poll, commissioned by The Oklahoman, asked registered voters how they would vote if elections were "today."

Bush got support from 50 percent of voters, including 27 percent of Democrats. The results put Bush 10 percentage points ahead of Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry.

In the race to replace Nickles, R-Ponca City, split GOP voters gave U. S. Rep. Brad Carson, D- Claremore, a 6 percentage point lead over his closest Republican challenger, according to the poll conducted by Wilson Research Strategies.

Democrats and Republicans were optimistic about the numbers, although for different reasons.

The GOP applauded the Democrats who favored Bush.

"I think that's kind of holding steady with what happened in 2000," state Republican Party Chairman Gary Jones said. "Oklahomans are conservative people whether or not they're Republican or Democrat."

Jones said that as Bush's campaign kicks into gear, the president's support will increase.

But Democrats said they plan to sway party members back to their candidate.

"If Democrats would vote Democrat, we wouldn't lose an election,"

percent) or central Oklahoma (34 percent).

state Chairman Jay Parmley said. "I look at the numbers as a great opportunity for us to make in-roads. Our job is to keep whoever the nominee is in front of our Democrats."

When Bush won in Oklahoma in 2000, he did so with 60 percent of the vote.

"If these are his numbers in Oklahoma, Democrats ought to be shouting for joy across the nation," Parmley said.

Gary Copeland, director of the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma, said the numbers are probably no reason to alarm either party.

"If these were numbers that were solid, it certainly would be very scary for the president," Copeland said. "But if this poll was to be repeated a month later, it could be very different."

As conservative Democrats may hinder Kerry's efforts in the state, split Republicans could cost the GOP the Senate seat.

Carson's lead is attributable to Republicans splitting support between former Oklahoma City Mayor Kirk Humphreys and state Corporation Commissioner Bob Anthony, said Chris Wilson, chief executive officer of Wilson Research.

Humphreys received 22 percent of the overall support and 40 percent of Republican voter support. Anthony garnered 17 percent overall and 27 percent of GOP supporters.

Head-to-head comparisons between parties are hard to make before primaries, Copeland said. "These are really preliminary numbers that really just show what their bases are."

Republicans said they will emerge from the July 27 primary with a strong candidate.

"Whoever emerges will have support of Republicans and conservative Democrats too," Jones said.

"Republicans are going to kill each other in the primary, and we'll be sitting there waiting for whoever emerges from their primary," Parmley said.

Carson's closest Democratic challenger, state Insurance Commissioner Carroll Fisher, is 19 percentage points behind.

Fisher has actually gained 2 percentage points since a November poll, despite a grand jury indicting him this month for allegedly embezzling money from an insurance education fund and illegally running a charity.

"It shows that for someone who's going through everything he is legally, he still has a base of support," Wilson said.

The poll also shows a division that separates Oklahoma's largest metropolitan areas.

In Tulsa, 44 percent of the registered voters supported Carson. In Oklahoma City, 34 percent backed Humphreys.

If both candidates survive primaries, they will have to win votes on their opponent's turf, Copeland said.

"Success in Tulsa is critical to a Republican statewide candidate," Copeland said about Humphreys.

He added about Carson, "He's not going to carry Oklahoma City. The question is how much he can eat into Humphreys' core in Oklahoma City."

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