

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Obama Propelled by Financial Crisis and Vice Presidential Debate

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

Lawrence R. Jacobs
Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance

Joanne M. Miller
Research Associate, Center for Study of Politics and Governance
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science

According to two Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute polls, the extraordinary financial crisis and the resulting congressional response along with the Vice Presidential debate propelled the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama from a narrow 4 point lead (47 percent to 43 percent) to a 14 point advantage among likely voters in Minnesota (54 percent to 40 percent).

Presidential Choice of Likely Minnesota Voters

	Obama	McCain	Somebody Else	DK / Refused
Before October 2 nd	47%	43%	2%	9%
After October 2 nd	54%	40%	2%	4%

The presidential race in Minnesota was impacted by several critical events before and after October 2nd. First, the financial crisis culminated in extraordinary action in Congress as the Senate passed a massive rescue bill and the House of Representatives reversed its earlier negative vote to enact the package on Friday October 3rd. Second, the debate between Sarah Palin and Joe Biden on Thursday October 2nd drew a record audience for a Vice Presidential debate; its audience was nearly 50 percent larger than the audience for the first presidential debate.

The surveys were conducted of 346 likely voters between September 29, 2008 and October 1, 2008, and 418 likely voters between October 3rd and October 5th. The margin of error is +/-5.3 percentage points and 4.8 points, respectively. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

Explaining Obama's Surge

Obama's surge after last week's events results from two general factors.

First, **the financial crisis and the culmination of congressional action increased the perception that Obama would do a better job handling the problems in the investment**

banking industry. Before October 2nd, the evaluations of the Obama’s and McCain’s handling of the investment banking problems were comparable – the Democrat held a narrow 4 point margin. In the days after October 2nd, however, Obama opened up a substantial 14 point advantage – 52 percent to 38 percent.

Strong Evaluations of Obama’s Handling of Financial Crisis

	Obama will do better job	McCain will do better job	Obama Advantage
Before October 2 nd	47%	44%	3 points
After October 2 nd	52%	38%	14 points

Vin Weber and other prominent Republicans warned that the opposition by House Republicans would “tarnish” the brand of the Republican Party for managing the economy and boost the Democratic Party’s reputation. Indeed, the dramatic events in Washington and other developments widened the gap between Minnesotans identifying with the Democratic Party as compared to the Republican Party from a 10 point margin to a 15 point margin.

Tarnishing the Republican Brand

	Identify with Democratic Party	Identify with Republican Party	Democratic Party Advantage
Before October 2 nd	49%	39%	10 points
After October 2 nd	53%	38%	15 points

The Vice Presidential debate was the second factor that boosted Obama’s support. Biden’s performance prompted 26 percent of Minnesotans who watched or read about the debate to become more likely to vote for Obama compared to only 8 percent who became less likely to support the Democrat. By contrast, Palin had little net effect on voters’ support for McCain.

Impact on Presidential Candidate of VP Debate Performance

	Palin’s Impact on Voting for McCain	Biden’s Impact on Voting for Obama
More likely to vote for Presidential Candidate	17%	26%
Less likely to vote for Presidential Candidate	19%	8%
Make No Difference	62%	64%

Biden’s boost of Obama reflected four shifts in voter evaluations of the Democratic and Republican running mates. There is a consistent and significant shift toward more favorable evaluations of Biden compared to Palin. Where Palin was seen as a bit more honest before the debate (45 percent to 41 percent margin), Biden was sized up as more honest afterward by those who saw or read about the debate (47 percent to 41 percent). This represents a net shift of 10 points – from a 4 point Palin advantage to a 6 point Biden edge. Similar or larger shifts toward a

more favorable evaluation of Biden occurred on presidential experience (8 point gain for Biden), caring (13 point gain), and centrist political views (12 point gain).

Changing Evaluations of Vice Presidential Candidates

	Pre-Debate		Post Debate		Shift Toward Biden
	Palin	Biden	Palin	Biden	
Honesty	45	41	41	47	10 points
Right Experience to Be President	24	67	21	72	8 points
Cares About People like Me	50	37	46	46	13 points
Political Views About Right	41	46	40	57	12 points

Room to Move: Race Remains Fluid

Although Obama has opened up a significant 14 point lead, the race remains fluid. The sudden speed of the shift from a narrow 4 point edge and the continuing openness of Minnesota voters suggest that the race may change in the coming weeks before Election Day. After October 2nd, more Minnesotans became certain of their choice for president but 12 percent continued to indicate that they might change their mind and these voters were evenly distributed between Obama and McCain. Although Obama has an edge among voters certain about their candidate, there is a room for future erosion in his support.

Remaining Uncertainty Over Candidate

	All Voters	Obama	McCain
Before October 2nd			
Certain	81%	53%	44%
May change mind	16%	33%	50%
After October 2nd			
Certain	88%	57%	40%
May change mind	12%	45%	49%

There are three elements of the Minnesotan electorate to consider in evaluating how the election may evolve in the coming weeks. To conduct this investigation, we combined our two surveys to create a larger sample that permits more fine-tuned analyses. (This combined set of data, which includes interviews with 766 likely voters from September 29 through October 5th, finds Obama ahead by 8 points, 50 percent to 42 percent.)

First, nearly 1 out of 5 voters (17 percent) are newer voters – that is, they are voting for the first time or have not voted in recent elections. Newer voters have yet to develop the “habit” of voting and may be particularly prone not to turn out to vote. **Among the more than half of the electorate that will definitely turnout, Obama has a 50 point lead.** McCain’s supporters are concentrated among voters less certain to vote: he has a 5 point edge among the quarter who are only probably going to vote, a 6 point lead among those who are probably not going to vote and a 60 point gap among those who definitely do not plan to vote.

McCain Supporters among Newer Voters May Not Turnout

	All Voters	Obama	McCain
Definitely will Vote	54%	74%	24%
Probably will Vote	23%	41%	46%
Probably won't Vote	10%	47%	53%
Definitely won't Vote	13%	20%	80%

McCain Opportunities Among Swing Voters

McCain appears to have some opportunities to pick up support among the 19 percent of likely voters who are undecided or may change their minds about which candidate to support. In particular, McCain has an edge among swing voters in handling the investing bank problems. In addition, swing voters accept that McCain will take the country in a new direction rather than continue the policies of President George Bush.

McCain Opportunities among likely voters who are up for grabs

Handling Problems in the Investment Banking Industry	%
Obama	32%
McCain	42%
Same (vol.)	7%
DK / Refused	20%
McCain and Bush policies	
Continue Bush policies	32%
Take the country in new direction	62%
DK / Refused	5%

Obama's Strong Coalition

Obama is assembling a strong coalition and minimizing support for McCain among groups of voters who might be expected to support the Republican. Obama has an 18 point advantage among women and only a 3 point deficit among men. In addition, Obama does not appear to be suffering from a racial backlash: the two candidates are about even among white voters (92 percent of likely voters) and enjoys a 50 point lead among voters of color. Obama also enjoys leads among different age groups, especially among youth (18 point gap) and seniors (12 point advantage).

Voter Groups that Support Obama

	All Voters	Obama	McCain
Male	49%	44%	47%
Female	51%	55%	37%
White	92%	47%	44%
Non-White	9%	75%	25%
17-29	15%	58%	40%
30-44	28%	47%	43%
45-59	29%	47%	43%
60 and older	28%	52%	40%

Evangelical Support for McCain

The lopsided support of evangelicals is a strength for John McCain, perhaps reflecting the benefit of having Sarah Palin on the ticket. Among the third of Minnesotan voters who are evangelicals, the Republican has a nearly 30 point advantage.

	All Voters	Obama	McCain
Evangelical	36%	33%	60%
Not Evangelical	64%	51%	38%

A Comparison with Previous Surveys of the Presidential Contest

Our findings are consistent with recent polls of a presidential election that has experienced remarkable events from the financial crisis to the extraordinary interest in the vice presidential candidates. Our survey in the 3 days before October 2nd found a close race that is statistically consistent with the SurveyUSA finding of a 1 point McCain edge. Our survey in the 3 days after October 2nd found a 14 point Obama lead that is statistically consistent with the Star Tribune poll,

which was in the field as Congress was starting to handle the financial rescue plan and the Vice Presidential debate was conducted.

Pollster	Date	Sample	Obama (D)	McCain (R)	Spread
Star Tribune	9/30-10/2	1084LV	55	37	Obama +18
SurveyUSA	9/30-10/1	725LV	46	47	McCain+1
CNN/Time	9/28-9/30	849LV	54	43	Obama +11

The financial crisis and the congressional responses to it combined with the historic debate between the vice presidential candidates may be producing significant turbulence in the race, which may help to account for the striking increase in Obama's support in our polls as well as the seemingly inconsistent findings of the 2 previous polls.

About the Survey

This survey is a collaboration between Minnesota Public Radio and the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. The survey was analyzed by the Center. The research team was Lawrence R. Jacobs (director) and Joanne M. Miller (Department of Political Science). Melanie Burns was the team's research and data analyst.

The survey was fielded by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, which has extensive national and state experience conducting non-partisan surveys on politics and government policy. CSRA called a sample of telephone exchanges that was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within the State of Minnesota. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. The samples were designed to represent different regions of the state in proportion to the number of adults living in each region. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

Results are based on a model which adjusts responses according to the likelihood of a respondent voting. Likelihood to vote is based on the following factors: self-reported probability of voting in the upcoming election, voting in previous elections as reported by the respondent, enthusiasm for the 2008 election, and incorporates differential turnout levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In addition, the results have been weighted to reflect the number of adults in a household and the number of telephone lines reaching the household as well as the demographic characteristics of adults in Minnesota based on region, sex, age, education, and race. Our analysis indicates that 70% percent of Minnesotans who are 18 or over are likely to vote in November.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

Questions

If the 2008 presidential election were being held today, would you vote for ... (READ CHOICES 1-2) (IF DK/REF: As of today, who do you lean more towards?)

Democrat Barack Obama.....	01
Republican John McCain.....	02
Somebody Else (specify).....	80 O
Won't vote (vol.).....	97
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

Are you certain now that you will vote for <q1> <q1:o> for president, or do you think you may change your mind between now and the November election?

Certain.....	01
May change mind.....	02
Don't Know.....	98
Refused.....	99

Which presidential candidate do you think will do a better job handling the problems in the investment banking industry? (READ CHOICES 1-2)

permutation -> 2.....	
Barack Obama.....	01
John McCain.....	02
Same (vol.).....	03
Don't Know.....	98
Refused.....	99

Does Palin's performance in the debate make you more or less likely to vote for McCain, or didn't it make a difference?

More likely to vote for him.....	01
Less likely to vote for him.....	02
It didn't make a difference.....	03
Don't Know.....	98
Refused.....	99

Does Biden's performance in the debate make you more or less likely to vote for Obama, or didn't it make a difference?

More likely to vote for him.....	01
Less likely to vote for him.....	02
It didn't make a difference.....	03
Don't Know.....	98
Refused.....	99

Next, I am going to read you a list of statements. Tell me whether you think each statement applies more to Joe Biden or Sarah Palin.

Continue 01 D

Is honest? (READ CHOICES 1-2) (PROBE: Which candidate does this statement apply more to?)

permutation -> 2
Joe Biden 01
Sarah Palin..... 02
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99

Has the right experience to be president? (READ CHOICES 1-2) (PROBE: Which candidate does this statement apply more to?)

permutation -> 2
Joe Biden 01
Sarah Palin..... 02
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99

Cares about people like me? (READ CHOICES 1-2) (PROBE: Which candidate does this statement apply more to?)

permutation -> 2
Joe Biden 01
Sarah Palin..... 02
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99

Next, I am going to asking about some of the political candidates competing in this year's election.

Continue 01 D

Do you think Joe Biden's political views are too conservative, about right, or too liberal?

Too Conservative..... 01
About Right 02
Too Liberal 03
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99

Do you think Sarah Palin's political views are too conservative, about right, or too liberal?

Too Conservative..... 01
About Right 02
Too Liberal 03
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99

If John McCain were elected President, do you think he would generally continue George W. Bush's policies, or would he take the country in a different direction?

Continue George W. Bush's policies 01
Take the country in a different direction 02
Don't Know..... 98
Refused..... 99