

Obama: How Bad is it for Him in Pennsylvania?

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

In Pennsylvania the springtime weather often changes suddenly. Humorist and satirist Mark Twain was describing New England, but he could have been talking about the Keystone State when he quipped, "If you don't like the weather...now, just wait a few minutes."

Presidential aspirant, Barack Obama, might be hoping some of that Pennsylvania predisposition to climatic variability inspires some equally dramatic changes in the prospects for his state campaign against Hillary Clinton. Certainly the Obama campaign is not doing well at all in Pennsylvania.

Just how bad is documented by some key findings from a series of polls, including the Franklin and Marshall College Poll, all released recently. Almost none of the results bode well for Obama. Across the board Clinton is winning and winning big. She has decisively stopped Obama's earlier momentum in Pennsylvania—and seems set for a romp.

Statewide among Democrats, Clinton holds a lead that ranges from 16 to 26 points. The Real Clear Politics consensus estimate is roughly 17 points. She is winning every major region of the state except Philadelphia, while Obama has actually slipped slightly with blacks and more substantially with younger voters—two demographics that are critical backstops for him in the contest. He has also lost support with other key constituencies including white males and evangelicals.

Moreover Clinton is seen by voters as the overwhelming favorite to deal with the economy and healthcare, two of the three issues Pennsylvania voters care most about, and she is virtually tied with Obama as the candidate voters most support to end the war.

Clinton has established her lead by accomplishing three critical campaign objectives: successfully appealing to several important voter groups, maintaining support across most major regions of the state, and convincing most voters she will deliver on the critical issues.

1. Appeal among Key Groups of Likely Voters: Clinton leads among women (57% to 29%), whites (57% to 29%), ages 55 and older (55% to 29%), union member households (67% to 26%), and Born Again Christians (45% to 38%). She also leads among Catholics (26 points) and Protestants (23 points). Obama has the clear edge only among non-whites (76% to 12%). Obama and Clinton are tied or virtually tied (within sampling error) among younger, college-educated, and male voters. (Source: Franklin & Marshall College Poll)

2. Support across Major Regions of the State: Clinton leads in every region of the state except Philadelphia and has overwhelming leads in the Northeast, Northwest, and Central Pennsylvania. She leads two to one in the Northeast and almost two to one in the Northwest and Central Pennsylvania. At this point only Philadelphia and the Philly suburbs (Southeast Pennsylvania) seem competitive for Obama. (Source: Franklin & Marshall College Poll)

3. Convincing on the Critical Issues: On the issues that voters say are most important, Clinton is controlling the field. Among voters who say the economy is most important, she is up 15 points. Among healthcare voters, she is up 19 points. Among voters who rank leadership highest, she is up 30 points, and among those who say electability is most important, she leads by 15 points. (Source: Quinnipiac University Poll)

But the Pennsylvania polls only tell why Clinton is doing so well; they don't explain why Obama is doing so badly. And this too needs to be understood in assessing what might happen during the final month of the campaign.

Among the reasons Obama is lagging in Pennsylvania is that he has not spent much time there, whereas Clinton has spent considerable time in the state since voting ended in Ohio and Texas. By some estimates she has invested twice as much time and made twice as many trips into the state. Equally important in understanding Obama's problems is the week or so of rough patch he endured during the controversy over his church pastor. That period probably produced a greater increase in his polling "negatives" than any other in the campaign. From just mid-February to mid-March, he sustained a 10 point decline in his favorable ratings according to the Franklin & Marshall College Poll.

Finally, and not least important, until Easter weekend, there has been no substantial TV advertising yet in the state. As the least known of the two candidates, Obama might be expected to benefit from concerted media introduced into the campaign.

For all these reasons, it's far too soon for the full figured lady to get ready to sing in this race. Obama is at his nadir in Pennsylvania. It will not get worse for him, and it could still be a very close contest. He has not begun to seriously engage in the state. Moreover his plausible path to victory through the Philadelphia suburbs remains an opportunity to be tapped.

To a remarkable degree for a candidate down by double digits, Obama may still control his own fate. In the next couple of weeks, we will see what he makes of that opportunity.

*Politically Uncorrected*TM is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2008 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.