

2008 Republican Presidential Primary

As Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton settle in for a long contest that may not end until the Democratic convention, many conversations naturally drift to the question of which candidate would fare better against likely Republican nominee John McCain.

This week, the early numbers seem to slightly favor Obama. In polling through Sunday, February 10, Obama held a four-point lead over the GOP hopeful while Clinton trailed the Arizona Senator by a couple of points. [Clinton also has a much higher percentage of the population committed to voting against her](#)

than either Obama or McCain.

However, those early numbers do not adequately answer the question of which Democrat would be more competitive.

The reality is that public opinion concerning Hillary Clinton is much more firmly established than it is for any other candidate. The former First Lady has been in the public eye on the national level for sixteen years. Some of this year's voters were in nursery school when she first moved into the White House. Fairly or unfairly, everybody has an opinion about her and those opinions are not likely to change much during the course of the campaign.

As a result, if Clinton is the nominee, Election 2008 would probably look a lot like Election 2004 and Election 2000. We'd start with the same set of red and blue states and wonder which ones might switch. Could Clinton take Arkansas and Ohio? Could McCain take New Hampshire. In some ways, Clinton would assume the incumbent's role as the better known candidate and the final result would probably be fairly close in the popular vote.

With Obama, it's much more difficult to tell what might happen partly because Obama has never run a competitive campaign against a Republican. The Illinois Senator has shown a natural gift on the campaign trail so far, but the ground rules and dynamic would shift dramatically in a general election campaign. The issues challenges would be entirely different and so would the demographic challenges. As just one example, consider Obama's solid support from African-Americans. While that has been a major asset in Primary battles, it would be nothing out of the ordinary for any Democrat in a general election campaign.

Neither Obama nor McCain is as well known as Clinton and perceptions of both would change over the course of a rough-and-tumble campaign. It is possible to envision a scenario where Obama wins a much larger majority of the popular vote than is possible for Clinton. It is also possible to imagine the opposite--an Obama candidacy that sinks and gives the GOP a solid majority of the popular vote.

The bottom line is that it's not a question of which Democrat is more electable. Hillary Clinton is the safer bet with less upside potential. Barack Obama is the higher risk option with a better possibility of a victory that could reshape American politics.

All of this takes place in an [election year context that strongly favors the Democrats](#)

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During the first month of 2008, [the number of people who consider themselves to be Democrats grew to the highest level in more than three years](#)

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But, there's a long way to go and the Democrats first challenge will be to select a nominee in a way that doesn't fracture the party.

And there's one more early challenge for the Democratic nominee--John McCain is viewed as

closer to the political center at this time than either of them--45% of voters consider the Arizona Senator to be politically moderate. Just 35% hold that view of Obama and 31% see Clinton as politically moderate. Roughly half the nation's voters view both Obama and Clinton as politically liberal.

For the seven days ending February 10, Hillary Clinton earns 47% of the vote and Barack Obama earned 41%. Twelve percent (12%) were undecided ([review history of weekly results](#)). The lines are being drawn: [Since last week](#), the number of undecided Democratic voters has gone down.

Among Republicans, since Mitt Romney dropped out of the race, John McCain earns 46% of the vote, Mike Huckabee attracts 34%, and Ron Paul picks up 8%. Twelve percent (12%) are undecided.

Full week results for general election match-ups will be posted starting next Monday.

Rasmussen Reports continuously updates general election match-ups and other measures for all [Republican](#) and [Democratic](#) Presidential candidates.