



**NBC News/Marist Poll:
Romney with Wide Lead in Florida**

*** Complete Tables for Poll Appended ***

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This NBC News/Marist Poll Reports:

In the race for the Republican nomination in Florida, Mitt Romney leads Newt Gingrich by 15 percentage points among likely Republican primary voters.

Romney's lead has changed little after Thursday night's debate. Before the debate, Romney had a 14 percentage point advantage over Gingrich. After the debate, he leads by 15 percentage points. Santorum improved his standing from 13% to 18% following the debate.

Here is how the contest stands **among likely Republican primary voters including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate, early voters, and those who voted absentee** in Florida:

Candidate	Total	Pre-debate	Post-debate
Mitt Romney	42%	43%	40%
Newt Gingrich	27%	29%	25%
Rick Santorum	16%	13%	18%
Ron Paul	11%	11%	11%
Other	<1%	<1%	1%
Undecided	4%	3%	5%

"Mitt Romney has shored up support among his key backers while cutting his loses among Tea Party voters," says Dr. Lee M. Miringoff, Director of The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. "The net effect is that he is in the driver's seat as Tuesday's primary approaches."

Key points:

- With votes already in the bank, Romney -- 49% -- leads Gingrich -- 27% -- **among early and absentee Republican primary voters in Florida**. Santorum receives 17% while Paul garners 6%.
- **Romney's best groups** include likely Republican primary voters who are **not Tea Party supporters** -- 52% -- those who identify themselves as **liberal or moderate** - - 49% -- those who are just **conservative** -- 47% -- and likely Republican primary voters who earn **\$75,000 or more** -- 49%. Romney also outpaces his competition among those who **want a candidate who can defeat President Barack Obama in the general election** -- 45%.
- **Romney holds his own** among those who are **Tea Party supporters**. Gingrich has 36% to 34% for Romney and 22% for Santorum. Among **Evangelical Christians**, Romney has 34% to 28% for Gingrich and 25% for Santorum.
- **Gingrich leads** among likely Republican primary voters who are **very conservative**. Here, he receives 36% to 29% for Santorum and 24% for Romney.

Increased Intensity of Support

How committed to their candidate are likely Republican primary voters in Florida? 67% strongly support their choice while 22% are somewhat behind their pick. 10%, though, might vote differently on Tuesday, and 1% is unsure.

There has been an increase in the proportion of voters who strongly support their candidate. In NBC News/Marist's December survey, 47% of likely Republican primary voters in Florida were firmly in their candidate's camp, 31% were somewhat committed to their choice, and 20% said they might cast their ballot differently. Two percent, at that time, were unsure.

Key points:

- 71% of **Romney's backers**, 68% of those who are behind **Gingrich**, and 64% of **Santorum's supporters** are firmly committed to their candidate. This compares with 47% of **those behind Ron Paul**.

Romney Leads Gingrich Even Without Santorum in the Race

If Santorum were not in the competition, Romney would still be ahead of Gingrich, 49% to 33%. Santorum's supporters divide when asked who their second choice candidate is. 36% of Santorum's backers choose Gingrich while 35% are for Romney.

Overall, 28% of likely Republican primary voters say Santorum is their fallback candidate while 27% select Romney. Gingrich is the second choice of 25% while 9% report Paul is their reserve candidate. 11% are undecided.

When it comes to the candidate voters least like, 50% select Paul while 23% choose Gingrich. Santorum is the least liked by 10% compared with 8% for Romney. Nine percent are undecided.

Electability Overshadows List of Other Candidate Qualities

What do voters look for when choosing a candidate? 41% of likely Republican primary voters in Florida believe it is most important for a candidate to be able to defeat President Barack Obama in the general election. 21% want someone who is closest to them on the issues while 20% think shared values is the key. Only 14% say someone who has the experience to govern is their priority, and 3% are unsure.

In December, 28% put electability at the top of their list while 26% wanted a candidate who shared their values. A candidate who was closest to them on the issues was most important to 23% while 20% thought a candidate with experience was the most important quality in a candidate. Four percent, at that time, were unsure.

Key points:

- Romney -- 45% -- leads Gingrich -- 32% -- among likely Republican primary voters who think **electability** is the most important candidate quality.
- When it comes to those who want a candidate who has the same **positions on the issues**, Romney -- 36% -- is ahead of Gingrich -- 24%.
- Among those who want a **candidate who shares their values**, Romney receives 37% to 29% for Santorum. Gingrich garners 17%.
- Among likely Republican primary voters who value **experience**. Romney -- 46% -- outpaces Gingrich -- 33%.

Perceptions of the Candidates

How is the likely Republican primary electorate in Florida sizing up the candidates?

- 38% think Rick Santorum is the **true conservative** in the race. Romney and Gingrich each receive 18% followed by 16% for Paul.
- Santorum -- 33% -- is also the candidate perceived to **best represent the middle class**. 20% say the same about Romney compared with 18% for Gingrich and 17% for Paul.
- A majority -- 52% -- report Gingrich is the candidate who can **best debate President Barack Obama**. Romney comes in a distant second with 31%.
- 37% believe Romney is the candidate who can **change Washington for the better** followed by Gingrich with 25%.
- When it comes to views on **immigration**, 30% report Romney best represents their views while 24% say Gingrich best shares their position.

- 29% see Romney as the candidate who **best understands voters' problems**. 22% view Gingrich in this light followed by Santorum with 20%, and Paul with 16%.

Majority Views Romney and Santorum to be Acceptable Candidates

More than six in ten likely Republican primary voters in Florida -- 62% -- believe Romney is an acceptable choice for the Republican nomination. 26% agree but with reservations while only 11% think he is an unacceptable choice. One percent is unsure. In December, 58% perceived Romney to be an acceptable pick for the top of the GOP ticket.

A majority of likely Republican primary voters in Florida -- 53% -- consider Santorum to be an acceptable candidate as the GOP presidential nominee, and 25% say he is a good fit, but they have hesitations. 18%, however, say he is not an adequate pick, and 4% are unsure.

Looking at Gingrich's acceptability, 48% say he is a good fit for the position while 26% think he is a suitable choice, but they have some concerns. 25%, however, don't believe Gingrich is a good choice, and 1% is unsure. Fewer voters deem Gingrich to be an acceptable candidate for the position than in December. At that time, 65% of likely Republican primary voters thought Gingrich to be a good choice for the Republican nomination.

Paul is the least acceptable candidate. Only 25% believe Paul is satisfactory, 27% agree but with reservations while a plurality -- 45% -- thinks he is an unacceptable selection. Three percent are unsure. In NBC News/Marist's December survey, a similar proportion -- 27% -- thought Paul was an acceptable pick.

Debates Impact Many Voters' Electoral Decision

What about the debates? To what extent have they shaped the Republican vote in Florida? 68% of likely GOP primary voters in the state say the debates have affected their vote to, at least, some extent while 32% say the debates have had little influence or no impact at all on their vote.

Majority Wants Quick End to Nomination Process

Do likely Republican primary voters think a speedy resolution will result in a stronger candidate, or will a prolonged primary contest have that effect? 55% say a quick nomination process where the nominee can focus on running against President Barack Obama will create a stronger candidate while 37% think a long nomination process where the nominee campaigns in many primary and caucus states before running against Obama will produce such a candidate. Eight percent are unsure.

While a majority of likely Republican primary voters in Florida -- 54% -- are satisfied with the current field of candidates, 43% would like to see someone else run, and 2% are unsure.

Six in Ten Believe Mormons are Christians

60% of likely Republican primary voters in Florida say a Mormon is a Christian while 40% report a Mormon is not a Christian, or they are unsure. In December, similar proportions shared these views. At that time, 57% thought a Mormon is a Christian while 43% said a Mormon is not a Christian or were unsure.

Key points:

- Romney -- 50% -- leads Gingrich -- 26% -- among likely Republican primary voters who report a **Mormon is a Christian**. Among those who say a **Mormon is not a Christian or are unsure**, Romney -- 30% -- and Gingrich -- 29% -- vie for the lead.

President Obama Ahead of GOP Challengers...Romney Closest Competitor

Which candidate is the most formidable opponent against President Obama?

Among Florida's registered voters:

- Nearly half -- 49% -- support the president while 41% are for **Romney**, and 10% are undecided. This is little changed from December when 48% backed Obama, 41% were for Romney, and 11% were undecided.
- When matched against **Paul**, half of registered voters in Florida -- 50% -- support Obama compared with 36% for Paul. 14% are undecided. Similar proportions shared these views in December when 49% favored the president, 36% rallied for Paul, and 14% were undecided.
- Against **Santorum**, Obama receives 50% to 35% for Santorum. 15% are undecided.
- President Obama has a 17 percentage point lead over **Gingrich**. The president receives majority support -- 52% -- to 35% for Gingrich. 13% are undecided. Last month, a majority -- 51% -- supported the president to 39% for Gingrich. 10%, at that time, were undecided.

Obama's Job Approval Rating at 46% in Florida

Looking at President Obama's job approval rating, registered voters in Florida divide. 46% approve of the job the president is doing in office while 46% do not, and 8% are unsure.

Little has changed since NBC News/Marist's previous poll. In December, voters also divided. 46% praised the president's performance while 45% thought it fell short. Nine percent were unsure.