NBC News/Marist Poll:
Romney with Early Lead in NH Among Likely GOP Primary Voters
*** Complete Tables for Poll Appended ***

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This NBC News/Marist Poll Reports:

With the New Hampshire Republican Presidential Primary just months away, Mitt Romney outpaces his GOP rivals in the Granite State.

Here is how the contest stands among likely Republican primary voters in New Hampshire:

- 44% for Mitt Romney
- 13% for Herman Cain
- 13% for Ron Paul
- 6% for Rick Perry
- 5% for Jon Huntsman
- 4% for Newt Gingrich
- 2% for Michele Bachmann
- 1% for Rick Santorum
- 1% for Gary Johnson
- 11% are undecided

“It's a fluid contest and there's still a long way to go, but Mitt Romney is enjoying somewhat of a home field advantage in neighboring New Hampshire,” says Dr. Lee M. Miringoff, Director of The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. “It will take a major change to dislodge him from the top position in this first-in-the-nation primary.”

When those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate are factored into the equation, there is little change. 45% of likely Republican primary voters including leaners back Romney. 13% support Cain while the same proportion -- 13% -- is behind Paul. Perry garners 7% while Huntsman receives 5% of the vote, and 3% pick Bachmann. Santorum and Johnson each receives 1%, and 8% are undecided.
The potential Republican electorate in New Hampshire, that is, all Republicans and those independents who plan to vote in the primary, shows a similar story. Romney leads with 43% followed by Paul with 14% and Cain with 12%. Perry receives 7% of the potential Republican electorate while 5% are for Huntsman. Three percent back Gingrich, 2% support Bachmann, and Santorum and Johnson each receive 1% of the vote. 12% are undecided.

Key points:
- Among likely Republican primary voters who support the Tea Party, 37% are behind Romney, 20% are for Cain, and 13% back Paul. Perry receives the support of 6% of these voters.
- 30% of likely Republican primary voters who strongly support the Tea Party back Cain. 28% are behind Romney.
- A majority of likely primary voters who plan on voting in the GOP primary for the first time -- 51% -- favor Romney.

Likely Voters Lukewarm Toward Candidate of Choice

Just 38% of likely Republican primary voters in New Hampshire say they strongly support their choice of candidate, including 44% of likely voters who are Tea Party supporters. 35% report they are somewhat committed to their pick while 26% believe they might vote differently. One percent is unsure.

Key points:
- 46% of likely Republican primary voters who support Paul and 45% who back Romney are firmly in their respective candidate’s corner. 33% of those who are behind Cain report the same about their pick.

Issues, Values Matter Most to Granite State Likely Republican Primary Voters

When it comes to deciding upon a candidate, 30% of likely Republican primary voters say someone who is closest to them on the issues is the key. 28% report shared values is the most important quality in a candidate. More than one in five -- 22% -- think the experience to govern is the quality they would most like to see while 19% emphasize someone who can defeat President Barack Obama in the general election. Two percent are unsure.

Key points:
- More than six in ten likely Republican primary voters who think experience is key -- 63% -- support Romney. 48% of those who want a candidate who has the potential to defeat the president also throw their support behind Romney.
- Although his support isn’t as strong, Romney also leads among those who view a candidate’s stand on the issues to be the most important attribute in a candidate -- 38% -- and among those who prefer a candidate who shares their values -- 35%.
From the Primary to the General…Romney Leads Obama, but Prez tops Perry

If Romney were to face off against President Obama in next year’s general election, nearly half of registered voters in New Hampshire -- 49% -- say they would support Romney. Four in ten -- 40% -- report they would back the president, and 11% are undecided. In 2008, Obama won New Hampshire by nine percentage points over John McCain.

However, it’s a different story if Perry challenges the president. In this hypothetical contest, the president leads 46% to Perry’s 40%. 14% are undecided.

Key points:
• Independent voters are the key. Romney receives the backing of 46% of independent voters. Perry, however, is supported by just 35% of these voters.

Obama Approval Rating at 38%….Nearly Three in Four Say Nation is Moving in Wrong Direction

Just 38% of registered voters in New Hampshire approve of the job President Barack Obama is doing in office while a majority -- 53% -- disapproves. Nine percent are unsure.

By party:
• Opinions divide along party lines with 73% of Democrats saying they approve of the president’s job performance and 86% of Republicans reporting they disapprove. 51% of independents are dissatisfied with how the president is doing in office.

Almost three quarters of New Hampshire adults -- 73% -- think the country is moving in the wrong direction while 19% believe it is travelling along the right path. Eight percent are unsure.