NBC News/Marist Poll:
Santorum and Romney Neck and Neck in Ohio
*** Complete Tables for Poll Appended ***

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This NBC News/Marist Poll Reports:

Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney are locked in a tight battle in the race for the Republican nomination in Ohio. Among likely Republican primary voters including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate, early voters, and those who voted absentee in the state, Santorum receives 34% to 32% for Romney.

Here is how the contest stands in Ohio:

- 34% for Rick Santorum
- 32% for Mitt Romney
- 15% for Newt Gingrich
- 13% for Ron Paul
- 1% other
- 6% are undecided

“Here we go again. It's another make or break state and it could go either way,” says Dr. Lee M. Miringoff, Director of The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. “One big Buckeye state difference is that, unlike earlier contests, Romney isn't running up the score among those who have already voted.”

Key points:

- Among early voters, Romney receives 39% to 35% for Santorum.
- Santorum does the best among likely Republican primary voters who are very conservative -- 51% -- those who are Evangelical Christians -- 44% -- and among Tea Party supporters -- 41%.
- Santorum -- 53% -- also does well among values voters.
• Among **Republicans**, Santorum has 36% to 33% for Romney. **Independent voters** divide with 31% for Santorum and 30% for Romney.

- Romney -- 37% -- does better among likely Republican primary voters who are **liberal or moderate** compared with 20% for Santorum. Among likely Republican primary voters in Ohio who **are not Tea Party supporters**, Romney leads Santorum 36% to 27%.

- Romney also has the advantage among those who want a candidate who can **defeat President Obama** -- 45%. Among those who emphasize **experience**, 40% are for Romney.

- Likely Republican primary voters who want a candidate who is **closest to them on the issues** divide. Here, Santorum and Romney each has 29%, Paul follows with 24%, and Gingrich has 12%.

**Majority Firmly Behind Candidate in Ohio**

57% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio strongly support their choice of candidate. 31% are somewhat committed to their pick while 11% believe they could change their mind before Tuesday. One percent is unsure.

**Key points:**

- 60% of **Gingrich’s supporters** are staunchly in his corner. This compares with 59% of **Santorum’s backers**, 56% of likely Republican primary voters who are behind **Paul**, and 51% of **those who are for Romney**.

**Little Change without Gingrich in Contest**

What would the contest look like without Gingrich in the race? 40% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio would support Santorum while 37% would back Romney. Paul receives 16%. One percent selects someone else, and 6% are undecided. Looking just at the second choice of Gingrich’s supporters, 40% choose Santorum compared with 32% who pick Romney.

Overall, Romney is the fallback candidate for 26% of Ohio’s likely Republican primary voters. 25% choose Santorum followed by 24% who select Gingrich, and 16% who pick Paul. Nine percent are undecided.

**Seven in Ten Believe Romney Will Be the GOP Nominee**

70% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio think Romney will ultimately be the Republican nominee. 13% believe Santorum will top the GOP ticket while 5% say Gingrich will be the victor. Only 3% report Paul will go the distance, and 1% believes none of the candidates will achieve the nomination. Eight percent are undecided.
Key points:

- Most Romney supporters -- 90% -- think he will be the party’s nominee. Even 67% of Gingrich’s backers, 66% of Paul’s supporters, and 61% of those behind Santorum say Romney will win the nomination.

Key Candidate Qualities

29% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio say electability is the most important quality in a candidate, and 28% emphasize shared values. 25% believe someone who has the same positions on the issues is the priority while experience is the most important quality to 16%. Two percent are unsure.

Electability vs. True Conservatism

Here is how the likely Republican primary electorate in Ohio is assessing the political landscape:

- Nearly six in ten likely Republican primary voters in Ohio -- 57% -- say it’s more important to have a nominee who can defeat the president in the general election while 36% report a candidate who is a true conservative is more important. Seven percent are unsure.
- Romney is the candidate that 53% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio think has the best chance of defeating President Obama in the general election. Here, Santorum receives 18%.
- When it comes to the true conservative in the race, 35% give that title to Santorum compared with 11% for Romney.
- 31% think Santorum is the candidate who best understands voters’ problems compared with a virtual three-way tie among the other candidates. Paul receives 19% while Romney and Gingrich each garner 18%.

Romney, Santorum Acceptable Nominees

A majority of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio -- 53% -- believe Rick Santorum is an acceptable choice for the top of the GOP ticket. 25% believe Santorum is a satisfactory choice, but they have concerns while 19% think he is not a good fit for the role. Three percent are unsure.

51% also think Mitt Romney is a good fit for the Republican nomination while 30% say he is acceptable, but they have reservations. 16% report Romney is an unacceptable pick, and 2% are unsure.

Fewer perceive Gingrich to be an acceptable selection. 40% think Gingrich is an acceptable choice while 29% agree but with hesitations. 28% report Gingrich is not an acceptable choice for the GOP nomination, and 3% are unsure.
Paul is the least acceptable candidate. Only 31% believe Paul is a good selection for the Republican nomination while 26% think he is acceptable, but they have reservations. 39%, however, think Paul is unacceptable, and 4% are unsure.

**Satisfaction with GOP Field**

51% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio are satisfied with the candidates seeking the GOP nomination. 46% would like to see someone else run, and 3% are unsure.

**Mormons are Christians, Says Majority**

56% of likely Republican primary voters in Ohio say a Mormon is a Christian. 44%, however, think a Mormon is not a Christian or are unsure.

**Key points:**

- Among those who believe a Mormon is a Christian, Romney -- 38% -- leads Santorum -- 28%. However, Santorum -- 41% -- is ahead of Romney -- 24% -- among those who report a Mormon is not a Christian or are unsure.

**Obama Leads Possible GOP Rivals**

How does the field of Republican candidates fare in Ohio against President Obama?

- Obama leads Paul, 48% to 38%. 13% are undecided.
- 50% support Obama compared with 38% for Romney. 12% are undecided.
- 50% of registered voters back Obama compared with 36% for Santorum. 14% are undecided.
- Obama -- 51% -- leads Gingrich -- 36%. 13% are undecided.

**Key points:**

- Looking at independent voters, Paul -- 45% -- leads Obama -- 37%. Obama leads his other potential Republican challengers among these voters.

Ohio voters are more likely to identify as independents than they were in a similar poll conducted in October 2008. 35% of registered voters now consider themselves to be independent compared with 31% at that time. Republican identification has decreased from 31% to 26%, and Democrats are little changed. They went from 37% in 2008 to 38% now.

“President Obama’s advantage over his potential challengers in Ohio is underscored by the fact that more voters support him over the GOP field than approve of his job performance,” says Dr. Lee M. Miringoff, Director of The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion.
Portman Does Little to Help GOP Chances against Obama

If Romney were to receive the nomination and ask Senator Rob Portman to be his running mate, little changes. 49% of registered voters in Ohio support Obama and Biden while 38% back Romney and Portman. 13% are undecided.

If Santorum gets the nod and selects Portman as his number two, 51% back the Democrats while 37% are for the Republicans. 13% are undecided.

Ohio Voters Divide about Obama’s Job Performance

45% of registered voters in Ohio approve of how President Obama is doing in office. 45%, however, disapprove, and 9% are unsure.

Voters Cautiously Optimistic about the Future of the U.S. Economy

When thinking about the future of the U.S. economy, 50% of registered voters in Ohio think the worst is over while 42% say the worst is still ahead. Eight percent are unsure.

Will the U.S. economy improve in the next year? 35% of Ohio voters say it will while 20% believe the economy will get worse. A plurality -- 42% -- reports it will stay about the same, and 3% are unsure.

Majority Says Nation on the Wrong Track

55% of Ohio registered voters think things in the nation are off on the wrong track while 40% believe they are moving in the right direction. Five percent are unsure.

Brown Leads Mandel, But Short of Majority in Hypothetical Contest

If Democratic incumbent Senator Sherrod Brown were to face off against Republican challenger Josh Mandel, what are Mandel’s chances of victory? As the contest stands, Brown leads Mandel, 47% to 37%. 16% are undecided.

Kasich Receives Mixed Reviews

Governor John Kasich is receiving mixed reviews from the Ohio electorate. 40% approve of the job he is doing in office while 43% disapprove. 17% are unsure.