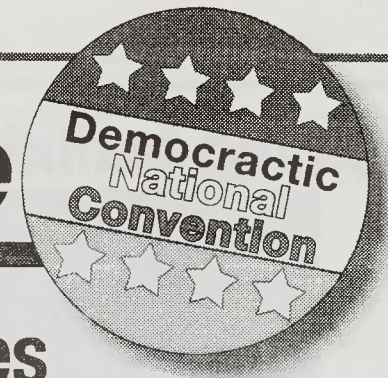


# The Pendulum covers the



## Elon Poll shows Romney winning battle for N.C. votes

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CHARLOTTE N.C. — The Democratic National Convention kicked off Sept. 3, and the latest Elon University Poll suggests President Obama will have to put up a strong front to secure a definite victory in this battleground state. With 43 percent of registered voters surveyed responding in favor of Obama and 47 percent in favor of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, it seems, at this point, the Republican nominee is likely to win more supporters and collect the state's 15 electoral votes.

A panel of six political analysts and writers convened Monday at The Charlotte Observer to discuss the poll results and add their insight into the issues at hand. David Gergen, CNN political analyst and director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, and Charlie Cook, editor of Cook Political Report and a National Journal columnist, were among the panelists.

The Elon Poll is a non-partisan, live-interview survey of North Carolina residents. This study, conducted in partnership with The Charlotte Observer and the Raleigh News & Observer, is the first Elon Poll to ask registered and likely voters for whom they would vote if the presidential election were occurring now. The polling team conducted interviews Aug. 25-30 using a randomized list of active landline and cell phone numbers in the state. The poll collected responses from 1,257 registered voters, but the results

reflect the responses of 1,089 individuals who were identified as likely voters. The results have a 3 percent margin of error.

The study is an in-depth look at voter preference in North Carolina. It examines residents' perception of both the candidates and the most important issues this election. Although Romney was found to be the overall favorite, the results vary when broken down into categories such as party affiliation, ideology, age, gender, education level and race.

### The nature of the battleground state

Although the poll shows Romney leading the race by four percentage points, Rob Christensen, chief political writer for the Raleigh News & Observer, said he believed the two candidates to be nearly tied with only a small margin of undecided voters to sway.

"Over the summer, we have seen something like \$50 million spent in the state by the two campaigns, and they really have not been able to move the needle," he said. "This is one poll that has shown a little larger Romney lead, but most of the polls have shown Obama up by a margin of error or Romney up by a margin of error. I think once we see two or three polls over the next few weeks, we can judge if there's really any movement in this race."

Despite Romney's slight edge, Cook said he thought Obama's significant share of supporters illustrated the transition of the southern state, historically a Republican stronghold before 2008, to a mid-Atlantic swing state.

"The states in the South that are changing are the states with a lot of out-of-state people moving in," he said. "It's changing the nature of the state. (There are) non-native North Carolinian white voters moving down, and a lot of them are

not from the South, so they just vote differently."

But North Carolina's inherent political leaning will still make it difficult for Obama to ultimately win it over, Gergen said, suggesting the poll is indeed indicative of the race's final outcome.

"Even though the state is in transition, it is more conservative than most states outside the South, and certainly among the mid-Atlantic states," he said. "If you ask people to identify not by party, but by whether they're liberal or moderate or conservative, the break is 21 percent variations of liberal, 22 percent moderate, and 49 percent variations of conservative. That is a tough environment for President Obama. That's not to say he can't win it. It is to say this convention becomes even more important for him."

### Romney and the economy

All panelists agreed the economy could be the defining issue of the election, which comes on the heels of the most severe recession since the Great Depression. In that regard, North Carolina voters consistently perceive Romney as more financially and economically trustworthy than his opponent. Forty-eight percent of likely voters identified the economy and jobs as the most important issues this election, and 55 percent of those respondents stated Romney as their presidential pick. Similarly, of the 13 percent of voters primarily concerned with the federal budget deficit, 77 percent would cast their ballot for Romney.

Anita Kumar, White House correspondent for McClatchy newspapers, said this perception, coupled with the high unemployment rate in North Carolina, plays a role in Romney's apparent lead.

"People are looking for a change," she said. "I think not enough things have changed (during Obama's term) and (North Carolina voters) think Gov. Romney can do a better job with the economy. I think most of the other polls are starting to show this state leans

Republican."

Obama has not clearly outlined a strategy to improve the economy during the next four years, Cook said, further bolstering Romney's argument for change.

"Why will the next four years be better than the last four years?" he asked. "That's a tricky question for the Obama campaign to answer."

### Votes by demographic

In 2008, Obama won North Carolina over John McCain by an extremely tight margin, and exit polls showed a high turnout of black voters, who made up 23 percent of the vote. Although the poll again shows high levels of support for Obama among black voters, Taylor Batten, editorial page editor for the Charlotte Observer, said Obama cannot necessarily count on that level of turnout again.

"There was a lot of attention paid to black and white voter turnout and how that was key to Obama's victory in 2008, but when you dig into the results, the white vote has more of an effect (percentage-wise)," he said.

And Romney seems to have relatively strong support from white voters, with 59 percent choosing Romney as their preferred candidate. Although Obama is supported by 89 percent of the black voters surveyed, they make up only 13 percent of the sample.

Obama's victory in 2008 was also secured in part by the votes of adults under 30, and although he remains more popular with that age group than Romney, the group's excitement about the election is significantly lower than that of older age groups.

Jason Husser, assistant director of the Elon Poll, noted this lagging enthusiasm might prevent young people from turning their opinions into votes.

"One of the most important issues in determining electoral turnout is excitement," he said.

On the other hand, most adults over 30 expressed both support for Romney and excitement about the election. If Husser's assertion about voter turnout

holds true, these age groups will have higher turnout rates at the polls than the 18-30 group.

"I think when you look at young voters, it's going to be difficult to replicate last time," said Kumar. "They aren't swept up in the same enthusiasm of the 2008 election. This is a state that's on the cusp."

### Foreign policy

Although the economy seems to be the most prominent issue determining this year's election, foreign policy is an important part of every presidential candidate's campaign. In this respect, Romney is trailing Obama in the popular vote. Forty-seven percent of voters said Obama would do a better job than Romney in handling foreign relations, while only 41 percent of voters thought Romney would do better.

Gergen said the percentages reflect the nation's overall satisfaction with Obama's foreign policy so far.

"A lot of Democrats and even a lot of Republicans found Obama did a better job (in handling foreign relations) than they expected him to," he said, referring to the widespread approval of Obama's counterinsurgency movement that killed Osama bin Laden, as well as his efforts to withdraw American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite Obama's successes in those areas, Gergen acknowledged foreign policy is not the primary concern of many voters. But the perpetual unrest in Syria, the growing tension between Israel and Iran and the economic weaknesses of the Eurozone could ultimately influence this year's election, he said.

"Here's the one big question: we don't know what's going to happen in the Middle East between now and the election," he said. "If Israel launches an attack against Iran, all bets are off."

The Obama campaign will intensify this week as the president prepares to address the nation Sept. 6. Whether he can gather the support he needs to win North Carolina is unclear, but each candidate has just over five weeks to convince voters he is the man for the job.



Charlie Cook, a panelist at The Charlotte Observer news conference, provides insight into poll results.

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