

## Where's Barack? Obama conspicuously absent from Tennessee

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Sen. Barack Obama trails Sen. Hillary Clinton in Tennessee according to a poll released Tuesday of 753 likely Democratic primary voters. *Josh Anderson/File/The City Paper*

Despite his two main rivals for the Democratic nomination heavily campaigning in Tennessee, Sen. Barack Obama's conspicuous absence does not mean he is conceding the state, his local political director says.

"I don't think anyone holds it against him," said Bob Tuke, Obama's Tennessee political director, about his candidate not visiting the state. "It's just a matter of, if you're here you get more ink and more attention and so you probably affect more potential voters that way."

Tuke said the campaign is working on a Memphis visit for Obama, but nothing has been finalized.

Obama has not come to the Volunteer State in months and has recently scaled back his advertising efforts in Tennessee leading up to the state's Feb. 5 primary while Clinton continues to air ads.

Tuke doesn't give complete credence to the notion that Obama not visiting Tennessee has hurt him and said the Illinois Democrat is not conceding the race here.

All the same, a Public Policy Polling survey released Tuesday of 753 likely Democratic primary voters in Tennessee has Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) leading Obama 43 percent to 32 percent. Former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) lagged in third with 16 percent.

Both Clinton and Edwards have appeared in Tennessee recently, with Clinton trekking to Nashville and Memphis this weekend just days after former President Bill Clinton stumped at Fisk University last week. Edwards visited Nashville and Chattanooga Monday, the day the poll was taken.

In response to the poll, Tuke acknowledged that Clinton led Obama in Tennessee, but thought the margin of the Public Policy Polling survey was broader than in reality. He also thinks Edwards supporters will swing to Obama if they become convinced the former North Carolina senator won't win.

After losses in New Hampshire and Nevada, Obama rebounded to win South Carolina resoundingly

versus Clinton on the strength of overwhelming support from black voters.

John Geer, a professor of political science at Vanderbilt University, said he suspects the Clinton campaign saw a chance in Tennessee to win a southern state that does not have as large of a black population as other Feb. 5 states like Georgia and Alabama.

And Obama may let Clinton have it, Geer said.

“He’s going to cede this state as it turns out to Hillary on the grounds that he’s going to take the battle to other states where he has a chance of winning, with California being the big prize,” Geer said.

Dean Debnam, the president of Public Policy Polling, said Tennessee’s lack of a large black population is limiting his rise.

“The primary electorate in Tennessee is only about 25 percent black,” Debnam said in a statement. “Obama continues to perform well behind Clinton among white voters, and he’s going to have difficulty winning primaries in states without large African-American populations if that continues.”

In poll results from Tennessee, Obama beat Clinton among black voters, 60 percent to 20 percent. But Clinton countered by leading 50 percent to 22 percent with whites.

Each of the respective Clinton events in Nashville has come at historically black colleges — Fisk University for Bill; Tennessee State University for Hillary.

In addition, Hillary spoke at a predominantly black Baptist church in Memphis Sunday.

Gender-wise, Clinton led Obama 47 percent to 28 with women and won among men as well, 39 percent to 35 percent, according to the poll.

While Clinton led Tennessee on the Democratic side, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who campaigned in Nashville Monday, led the Republican candidates.

The survey of 1,093 likely Republican primary voters has Huckabee ahead of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) 30 percent to 26 percent. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney came in third with 22 percent.

Fred Thompson, although still on the ballot in Tennessee, was not included in this latest poll. The former state senator withdrew from the race on Jan. 22.

Among Republican respondents, the economy and jobs ranked first as their most important issue with 28 percent. McCain won that category, garnering 37 percent of those marking the economy as their top issue.

Coming in a close second at 24 percent, however, were moral and family values, a category Huckabee dominated with 53 percent support from those who ranked social issues as their No. 1 concern.

That support among Evangelical-minded voters propelled Huckabee to win in the poll, Debnam said.

“The key to Mike Huckabee’s success in Tennessee compared to South Carolina is that more GOP voters in the state list moral and family values as a top concern when deciding who to vote for,” Debnam said.

Huckabee finished second to McCain in the Palmetto State.

The margin of error for the Democratic poll was plus or minus 3.6 percent and plus or minus 3 percent for the GOP.