

NATION & WORLD

# Poll says both primaries close in New Hampshire

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Republican John McCain and Democrat Bill Bradley score high marks with New Hampshire voters, who also think that George W. Bush and Al Gore give their respective parties the best chance for a November presidential victory, a new poll says.

Both races are too close to call with two weeks to go before the nation's first presidential primaries Feb. 1, according to an ABC-Washington Post poll released Tuesday.

Among those planning to vote in the GOP primary, McCain, an Arizona senator, had 40 percent to 36 percent for Bush. On the Democratic side, Bradley, a former senator from New Jersey, claimed the support of 48 percent to Gore's 47 percent. The differences in both races were within the poll's error margin.

The survey of 2,223 New Hampshire adults — including 733 likely Republican primary voters and 534 likely Democratic primary voters — was conducted Thursday through Sunday. The error margin for the Republican and Democratic samples was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

McCain and Bradley do well when voters give their overall impressions of the candidates.

McCain fares very well with those who say they are likely to vote in the GOP primary. He was viewed more favorably than Bush on nine of 11 traits measured in the poll.

Nearly three in four say the former Vietnam prisoner of war is "an inspiring candidate," while barely half say Bush inspired them. Similarly, more Republicans see McCain as a strong leader, able to "bring needed change to Washington," and the most likely to tell the American people the truth "even if it's not politically popular."

Overall, Democrats in New Hampshire rate Bradley as superior to Gore on a majority of the traits measured, including bringing change to Washington, saying what he thinks even if it's unpopular and being a more inspiring candidate.

But Bush and Gore, front-runners in national polls, are both perceived by those

in their own parties as having the best chance of success in November, a factor possibly balancing the good traits voters attribute to McCain and Bradley.

More than seven in 10 New Hampshire voters, and a similar majority in the national poll, said they want their next president to take "small, steady steps" toward solving the nation's problems. Only one in five said they favor a chief executive who would have "big, new ideas," Bradley has said he is the candidate of bold proposals, especially on health care.

Taxes, Social Security and Medicare top the issues that New Hampshire Republicans say are important to them this election year. Among voters most in-

terested in taxes, Bush holds a double-digit lead over McCain. However, Republicans are divided over whether Bush can cut taxes and keep the budget balanced. And McCain has an advantage among GOP voters most concerned about Social Security and Medicare.

Education, Social Security and Medicare were the issues most important to the largest proportion of Democratic voters in the state. Gore has a modest advantage over Bradley on education, while neither candidate had the edge on Social Security, Medicare or health-care reform.

## CHECHNYA

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portant" site in Grozny, a bridge crossing the Sunzha River that is a major transit route for rebels.

A Russian spokesman, Valentin Astafyev, told NTV television that federal troops have reached the bridge.

Russian aircraft and artillery bombarded rebel positions without pause on Tuesday. The air force said its planes and helicopter gunships flew 80 combat sorties over Grozny and southern mountain regions Tuesday morning, and that the raids would be stepped up throughout the day, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

Russian jets struck the Vedeno and Argun gorges, which lead through rebel-held mountains to the republic of Georgia. Artillery systematically shelled the rebel town of Vedeno. Russian forces control the heights around Vedeno, but they've been cautious about entering the town, believed to shelter many well-armed militants.

Instead, they laced footpaths and fields around Vedeno with mines.

"But we can't lay mines everywhere," an exhausted Capt. Andrei Kulov said.

He said a helicopter was flying regu-

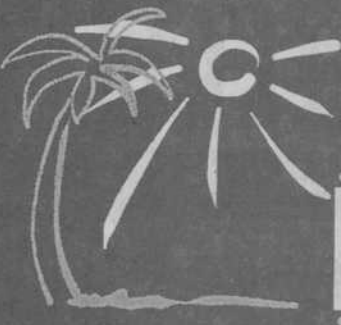
larly from Georgia to the Chechen mountains to deliver supplies to the rebels. Federal troops have been unable to intercept the helicopter because it changes routes, he said.

Russian forces took control over the Sharoi region, near Chechnya's mountainous border with Georgia, on Monday, after three days of heavy fighting and 100 Russian casualties, according to officers in the south. They reported that rebels had kept huge stores of weapons and food in the region.

The official death toll continued to be much lower. Eight Russian soldiers were killed and 12 wounded in Chechnya over the past 24 hours, Astafyev, the military spokesman, told NTV. He said 60 rebels had been killed over the same period.

Both sides in the war tend to underestimate their own losses and overstate the other's.

In Russian-controlled areas, civilians continued to report attacks by Russian troops. On Tuesday, an Associated Press reporter saw three Russian helicopter gunships attack two cars near the city of Urus-Martan, killing two people and injuring three. It wasn't clear why the helicopters had targeted the cars.



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