Daily News/Scripps poll: Romney and Obama in dead heat in Florida

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NAPLES — The state’s 29 electoral votes are up for grabs as President Barack Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney descend on Florida for their third, and final, debate Monday.

A Naples Daily News/Scripps Presidential Poll of 800 likely voters throughout the state indicates a virtual dead heat in the race between Obama and Romney.

The poll, commissioned by E.W. Scripps television stations in West Palm Beach and Tampa, the Treasure Coast Newspapers and the Naples Daily News, shows the former Massachusetts governor with 48 percent of the vote to Obama’s 47 percent of the vote. Four percent of voters said they still are undecided.

The poll, which was conducted by Public Policy Polling on Wednesday and Thursday after Tuesday night’s second presidential debate, has a plus-minus margin of error of 4 percent.

"It’s just going to be down to the wire," said Susan MacManus, a political science professor at University of South Florida-Tampa. "Anyone can take it."

The Naples Daily News/Scripps poll showed results similar to one conducted by Public Policy Polling from Oct. 12 through Oct. 14, just days before the Oct. 16 presidential debate. In that poll, 49 percent of the 791 respondents said they would vote for Romney, while 48 percent said they would vote for Obama.

But Casey Klofstad, a political science professor at the University of Miami, said the polls could be missing key Democratic voting blocs because of its polling methods.

Public Policy Polling reaches out to voters using landline phones, not cellphones. Klofstad said a landline-only technique tends to under-report younger, poorer and minority voters who tend to only have a cellphone.
Obama fared better among black voters than Romney, with 80 percent support compared with 10 percent for Romney. More Hispanics, on the other hand, said they supported Romney, at 49 percent to 46 percent for Obama.

Jim Williams, an analyst at Public Policy Polling, said Romney's lead among Hispanic voters "can be chalked up to the South Florida Hispanic community, especially in the Miami area where they tend to vote more Republican."

But Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at east coast Florida Atlantic University, said it would have been helpful to see numbers subdivided among various Hispanic groups because some — Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, for example — tend to vote more Democratic.

Obama trounced Romney when it came to the youth vote, with 62 percent to Romney's 29 percent. That demographic was key in 2008 and experts have said it will continue to play a big role in the 2012 election. Romney won the white vote with 57 percent to Obama's 38 percent.

Still, while the traditional voting blocs are important, all eyes are on independent and persuadable voters.

Like the overall race, the fight for independents is a virtual dead heat, with 47 percent lined up behind Obama and 46 percent going for Romney, according to the Naples Daily News/Scripps Presidential Poll. That's a shift from Public Policy Polling's Oct. 12 through Oct. 14 poll, which showed 51 percent of independents supported Romney, while 43 percent supported Obama.

The number of voters surveyed in the Naples Daily News/Scripps Presidential Poll who said they would change their mind before Election Day — those much-sought-after persuadable voters — was small. None of the Democrats surveyed and only 2 percent of the Republicans said they may change their mind in the next two weeks.

Mickey Gargan, chairwoman for Collier County's Democratic Executive Committee, said the overall numbers were surprising, especially this late in the election season.

"It's extremely surprising," she said. "It's the wrong direction from what I would like."

Naples Mayor John Sorey, the honorary Collier County chairman for the Romney campaign, said he isn't surprised by the tight race.

"I think it's going to be a dead heat," Sorey said. "I think it's just that close. That's why I'm working 24/7 to get every vote out in Collier County."

Making sure every registered voter gets to the polls may be an easy task.

"Both sides are pumped up," Williams said, "and it's no surprise that partisanship is going to play such an important role (in the race)."
Eighty percent of those surveyed said they were "very enthusiastic" about the presidential election, while 13 percent said they were "somewhat enthusiastic."

Gargan said more locals are getting fired up about the presidential election, and in recent weeks her office has been flooded with volunteers.

What folks are getting sick of though, Gargan said, is campaign ads. But the Naples Daily News/Scripps Presidential Poll showed just 3 percent of respondents said political advertising is the most influential factor in their presidential choice.

That number, Wagner said, is a "truly misleading number."

"Nobody wants to admit that they're subject to being influenced by a 30-second commercial," he said. "The truth is, if political advertising, particularly negative political advertising, didn't work, politicians wouldn't be doing it."

Both Gargan and Sorey said the debates may have affected voters' feelings, but 42 percent of respondents said they made up their minds early and haven't been swayed by political advertising, conventions or the debates.

"Looks like it's going to be another nail-biter," Wagner said. "The race is a statistical tie that's probably going to come down to turnout, to which candidate gets his people to the polls just a little bit better than his opponent."