



Published on *Sunshine State News* (<http://www.sunshinestatenews.com>)

GOP Primary Voters 'Undecided' in Attorney General Race

Pollster: Watch out for Pam Bondi in a tight three-way contest

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Posted: August 4, 2010 4:05 AM



The front-runner in the Republican race for attorney general is none of the three candidates in the contest, according to a Sunshine State News Poll released Wednesday. It is "Undecided."

With less than three weeks left until the primary, 55 percent of respondents say they haven't

yet selected a favorite from a field of two Tallahassee insiders and one outsider.

Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp and former state prosecutor Pam Bondi are locked in a virtual dead heat at 17 percent and 16 percent respectively, according to the statewide Sunshine State News Poll by Voter Survey Service. Holly Benson, former secretary of the state Agency for Health Care Administration, runs third at 12 percent.

"It's up for grabs between Bondi and Kottkamp, but Bondi is the one to watch. She's the only candidate who isn't part of the (Charlie) Crist team, the only one who's not part of the Tallahassee crowd," said Jim Lee, president of VSS, which conducted the poll.

The VSS survey, commissioned by Sunshine State News and taken July 26-30, is the largest poll of Florida voters this year. The sampling questioned 1,345 Republicans who say they will cast ballots in the Aug. 24 primary election.

Each of the attorney general candidates shows regional strength, with Kottkamp faring best in his home base of Southwest Florida, Bondi dominating the Tampa Bay area and Benson maintaining an edge in North Florida and the Panhandle.

But none of the candidates has broken out to be a favorite statewide.

Likewise, the GOP field is closely clustered financially. The latest filings show Kottkamp with \$316,589 on hand; Bondi with \$400,942; and Benson with \$274,969.

Kottkamp has collected the most endorsements, picking up dozens of letters of support from sheriffs, police chiefs and state legislators.

Benson recently received the backing from two former chairmen of the Republican Party of Florida -- Carole Jean Jordan and Tom Slade.

But it's Bondi, running as a relative outsider, who "has the most room to grow," Lee said.

The only candidate in the race who has worked as a prosecutor, Bondi "is a political novice who has become a seasoned campaigner," Lee observed.

Bondi also has become a Tea Party favorite, boosting her standing with the Republicans' conservative base.

"(Bondi) has to consider this a very good poll. The campaign is moving in a favorable direction for her," Lee said.

Bondi told Sunshine State News:

"Our campaign has all of the momentum right now. We have been endorsed by the Florida Chamber of Commerce, three major newspapers, former Republican Party Chairman Al Cardenas, and hundreds of Jeb Bush campaign leaders from around the state.

"I am grateful for their support and am confident that this grass-roots strength and momentum will propel us to victory on Aug. 24."

Kottkamp, who led Bondi by three percentage points in a May 5 Mason Dixon poll (in which 72 percent were undecided), is bullish about his prospects.

"As the undecided voters continue to narrow, Lt. Gov. Kottkamp continues to lead. We know this will be a close election, but are confident Republican voters want a real Republican with proven leadership to be their attorney general. Now's not the time for on-the-job training," said Kottkamp spokesman David Bishop.

Benson spokeswoman Sarah Bascom, said, "This poll indicates what many polls out there have indicated. There is a very large percent of undecided voters and the race is wide open.

"The candidates for attorney general are virtually in a dead heat and whichever candidate is able to get their message out the best over the final weeks will win."

While all three candidates hold similar positions on red-meat issues -- such as favoring Arizona's immigration law and expressing unqualified support for gun rights -- there are subtle differences, as well.

Kottkamp's campaign is notably backed by social conservatives, including John Stemberger and the Florida Right-to-Life PAC. Benson boasts of her administrative experience as secretary of AHCA and, previously, the Department of Business and Professional Regulation.

But, whereas Kottkamp and Benson each served six years in the Florida Legislature, Bondi, a fourth-generation Floridian, counters that Tallahassee tenure with 18 years as a state prosecutor in Hillsborough County.

By keeping her distance from the Crist crowd, Bondi doesn't carry the baggage of being appointed by a governor who ultimately defected from the party. Kottkamp was selected by Crist to be his lieutenant governor and Crist picked Benson to head AHCA.

Benson further burnished her establishment credentials recently by publicly praising Attorney General Bill McCollum for siding with Arizona in that state's effort to enforce its new immigration law.

Though initially dismissed by party insiders as an outsider and a long shot, Bondi has turned those attributes to her advantage in this year of restive voters.

With 55 percent of respondents still undecided, the [VSS poll](#) suggests that Republicans may be looking beyond the party line and outside Crist's coterie of cronies.

"Bondi has the potential to win this," Lee said.

VSS, an independent polling company which is a division of Susquehanna Polling & Research, questioned 1,345 likely Republican voters across Florida. Sunshine State News Poll's margin of error is 2.67 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

Coming Thursday: How Republican voters feel about Florida's campaign finance law.

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Attachments:

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