

September 25, 2009

<http://detnews.com/article/20090925/POLITICS02/909250376>

Poll shows edge for Cox as GOP opens leadership conference

MARK HORNBECK

Detroit News Lansing Bureau

Lansing -- As Republican candidates for statewide offices converge on Mackinac Island today to court party activists, a statewide poll shows Attorney General Mike Cox with an early edge in the governor's race.

Cox leads Lt. Gov. John Cherry, the front-runner for the Democratic nomination, 45 percent to 32 percent in a survey of 600 likely voters conducted by Mitchell Research & Communications Inc. and provided to The Detroit News.

In a smaller sample of 209 likely Republican voters, Cox drew 30 percent support, followed by U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra of Holland at 23 percent, then Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard at 11 percent and Ann Arbor investor Rick Snyder and state Sen. Tom George of Kalamazoo at 2 percent, with one-third undecided.

Pollster Steve Mitchell said Cox has "a solid lead" but the large number of undecided voters means the contest is up for grabs.

"This race will ultimately be decided by who has the most money to carry their message to the voters next August," he said.

All five GOP candidates will be on Mackinac Island this weekend for the Republican Leadership Conference. They'll take part in the first full-fledged debate of the campaign Saturday morning. Sponsored by the Michigan Taxpayers Alliance, the debate will be broadcast by radio stations across the state.

Republican consultant Tom Shields said the conference used to be the unofficial kickoff of campaign season for Republicans, but since many campaigns are under way it has become more than that.

"There's some pressure there to have a good showing with lots of volunteers," Shields said. "It was the kickoff, now it's almost like campaigns need to be peaking at Mackinac."

The island summit is the perfect spot for all GOP candidates to woo party regulars, do a little fundraising and make an attempt to stand out against the competition. They'll shake hands on the sprawling porch of the Grand Hotel, host receptions for the attendees and meet behind closed doors with party bigwigs.

Stu Sandler, campaign manager for Cox, added: "We look at this conference as a chance to meet with the party base."

Michigan Republican Party Chairman Ron Weiser expects 1,800 to attend, the largest crowd ever for a conference ahead of a gubernatorial election.

The theme of the conference is "Fix Michigan." Saturday afternoon panels will focus on Michigan's image, the economy and governing. Former Gov. John Engler will take part in the panel on "Jobs and How We

Govern Ourselves."

"Grassroots activists will have a chance to engage at a deep level and provide insight into how we can get Michigan going in the right direction," Weiser said.

National Republican dignitaries will also be in for the weekend event. Michigan native Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and a 2008 candidate for president, will be the keynote speaker Saturday night. Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty is the Saturday lunch speaker and Florida Gov. Charlie Crist will speak to attendees tonight. Romney, Pawlenty and Crist are all potential presidential candidates in 2012.

The Mitchell survey also paired up potential Republican attorney general candidates Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop of Rochester and former congressman and Court of Appeals Judge Bill Schuette against a leading Democratic candidate, Sen. Gretchen Whitmer of East Lansing. Bishop led Whitmer 36 percent to 26 percent, while Schuette and Whitmer were tied at 32 percent in the poll.

mhornbeck@detnews.com">mhornbeck@detnews.com (313) 222-2470