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**HEADLINE:** GOP hopeful McCain surges in early-primary states

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**BODY:**

A new poll shows Sen. John McCain with a commanding lead in the Republican race for the White House in three early primary states - including New Hampshire - even as some pundits have all but written him off.

On the heels of his formal campaign announcement in Portsmouth, N.H., last week, the poll by American Research Group shows McCain leading the Granite State with 29 percent support - a six-point hike over his ranking in March. Former Bay State Gov. Mitt Romney is running a strong second in New Hampshire at 24 percent, while former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has dropped 10 points to 17 since February, the poll shows.

``In these key states, he seems to be ahead, which means his campaign is not dead in the water," Fordham University political science professor Costas Panagopoulos said of McCain. ``Giuliani has pulled ahead in the national polls but this is a very different story than what we're seeing in the state polls."

The news for McCain is also good in Iowa and South Carolina, which are also among the first states to vote in the 2008 GOP primary. In Iowa, McCain dropped slightly from 29 to 26 percent, but is up from the 23 percent he received in February. Giuliani is at 19 in Iowa, a 10-point decline since February, while Romney is at 14 percent, up from just 8 two months ago.

In South Carolina, the poll shows McCain at 36 percent, Giuliani at 23, actor Fred Thompson at 10 and Romney at 6.

New York University political science professor **Mitchell Moss** said the strong poll numbers are key for McCain as he struggles to catch Giuliani and Romney in the fund-raising race.

``McCain is not going to fade away," Moss said. ``He's the only one of the candidates who has run for president before. That counts for something. He may have staying power."

Moss said the numbers also bode well for Romney.

``I think Romney is still going to be there. He's not going to fade away either," Moss said.

The surging McCain numbers come as the Arizona senator floated the idea of forming a ``League of Democracies" made up of ``like-minded" nations focused on peace. The organization, which McCain proposed during a speech at Stanford University in California yesterday, would act in situations where there may not be a United Nations consensus, such as in Iran and Darfur, he said.