

At cigar shop, smoke signals indicate it's a Mitt vs. Ron matchup

By Joe Battenfeld

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BALLOT BAGS: Stephen Bracciotti votes in the matchbook poll at Federal Cigar in Portsmouth, N.H. The shop has been running 'matchbook polls' for more than 30 years.

Forget the straw polls, the Gallup polls and the robo-polls. The only poll that matters in New Hampshire this election is the tobacco poll.

And based on a visit to one of the polling places, Federal Cigar in Portsmouth, the winner could be the guy who has never inhaled: [Mitt Romney](#).

The well-known cigar shop has been conducting its presidential "matchbook" polls for at least 30 years, and claims 80 percent of its winners have won at the voting booth, too. Visitors to the four stores in New Hampshire already have cast about 2,000 "votes," which consist of dropping a matchbook into a paper bag with the candidate's name on it.

The results won't be announced until just before the Jan. 10 primary, but based on the early returns (OK, we peeked into the paper bags), the Republican contest seems to be a two-way race. The store empties out the bags every night, but on Tuesday it looked as if Romney was way ahead, with Ron Paul second. Poor Rick Perry's paper bag was empty.

“I don’t know who’s in the lead, I cannot say,” said Ben Dickey, general manager of Federal’s flagship Portsmouth store. “Romney might take it home ... or Ron Paul. We shall see.”

The store puts up paper bags for even the obscure candidates such as Danny Woodring, but it’s safe to say President Obama is winning the Democratic race in a landslide. Many candidates and potential candidates have visited the store, including Donald Trump. Dickey said even a noncandidate, Boston Mayor Tom Menino, has been in to buy one of Federal’s famous stogies, although I’m betting his doctors and his wife don’t know about it. Sorry to spoil the secret, Mayor.

But Romney, a Mormon who doesn’t smoke or drink, has not been in yet.

“He might,” Dickey said. “You don’t have to smoke to stop by.”

Maybe, but it’s unlikely. Because customers are allowed to light up in the store, Romney would have to inhale at least a little if he came in.

So hurry down to the Federal stores before the polls close. Even if you don’t vote, you will get a nice whiff of some excellent tobacco.

http://bostonherald.com/news/us_politics/view/2011_1229at_cigar_shop_smoke_signals_indicate_its_a_mitt_vs_ron_matchup