Iowa political insiders and analysts are putting their money on Terry Branstad to win the Republican Party's top-of-the-ticket race in Tuesday's primary election.

One longtime insider to GOP politics predicted this week that Branstad will win with roughly 50 percent of the vote, with Bob Vander Plaats just under 30 percent and Rod Roberts at about 16 or 17 percent. That insider said he would be "shocked" if Branstad didn't win the nomination.

But Dennis Goldford, a political-science professor at Drake University, gives the social-conservative backing behind Vander Plaats a little more credit than that. "I'd be surprised if Branstad lost the primary, but I wouldn't be shocked," he said. "It may well be that Branstad wins. I wouldn't say he got it, [that] it's done."

A Research 2000 Iowa Poll of 600 likely Republican-primary voters taken May 31 to June 2 and released Thursday evening by KCCI-TV showed Branstad ahead by 15 points: He'd win 44 percent of the vote, followed by Vander Plaats at 29 percent and Roberts at 12 percent.

A separate poll of 474 likely Iowa Republican-primary voters taken May 25 to 27 by Public Policy Polling of Raleigh, North Carolina, and released this week also showed Branstad would win by 15 points: He'd win 46 percent of the vote compared with Vander Plaats' 31 percent and Roberts' 13 percent. The poll had a margin of error of 4.5 percent.

Goldford said: "The thing I would caution [is that] the kind of support in Vander Plaats' corner tends to a great extent to be under-the-radar support. They've got [it] through churches, they've got their ways of organizing and meeting. There's a certain passion there among Vander Plaats supporters that is not there among the Branstad supporters."

Vander Plaats is counting on that and maintained this week that his internal polling shows the race is much closer than publicly portrayed, and the poll of likely Iowa Republican primary voters misses the independents and others who will vote Republican on Tuesday.

"Everything is setting up exactly as we had planned. I think we're going to be successful on June 8," Vander Plaats said. "Regardless of the outcome of Tuesday June 8, our campaign is going to have a significant portion of that primary. If we don't win the majority of the votes ... we will be very, very close to a close second."

Meanwhile, Branstad campaign spokesperson Tim Albrecht said the campaign's get-out-the-vote efforts are focused on turning out supporters for Branstad by working with its 300 county chairs across the state.

Most analysts place Roberts, a state representative, a distant third in the contest for the GOP gubernatorial nomination. But Republicans say they're hearing in the activist and volunteer community that Roberts rose in popularity following the three televised Republican gubernatorial debates, and that some view him the most acceptable candidate next to Branstad. They said some of the attacks launched by Vander Plaats may have backfired.

Roberts acknowledged to IowaPolitics.com that he's the underdog in this race but said his campaign has a plan to win that includes television, radio, newspaper, and Internet advertising.

"But in addition to these paid advertising efforts, we've also launched statewide, grassroots, get-out-the vote efforts," Roberts said Wednesday. "These efforts include neighbor-to-neighbor phone-calling, door-knocking, use of social networking tools, and other forms of person-to-person contact to turn out votes for our campaign. Finally, our campaign will be traveling extensively all across the state as part of our Whistle-Stop Victory Tour over the next 7 days. We think the combination of these efforts is going to help us pull off an historic come-from-behind victory in the June 8 Republican primary election for governor."

Culver Campaign Mum About Preferred Opponent

Democratic Governor Chet Culver kicked off his re-election campaign last month with a 41-county tour, and state Democrats have launched a new stage of their coordinated campaign by moving into a new office on the west side of Des Moines. Campaign events are scheduled for throughout the summer and into the fall.

"We're just waiting to see who we will face in the general," Culver campaign spokesperson Ali Glisson said Wednesday.

Glisson said a poll released this week on the Republican gubernatorial primary shows that "the whole thing is still in flux." She declined to say that Democrats would prefer to have former Governor Branstad win because of his baggage, only saying: "I don't think we're going to take any of that for granted. We'll just see who we face. I wouldn't want to speculate about one candidate's going to be easier to beat or another."

Should Branstad win the nomination, attacks made against him by his fellow Republicans in the primary election are expected to resurface in the general election. They include his record of having raised taxes during his 16 years as governor, and his criticizing Culver's I-JOBS bonding-for-infrastructure program but having bonded during his tenure.

Meanwhile, results of several polls showing that Branstad would beat Culver in a head-to-head matchup haven't gone unnoticed by the Culver campaign. "The polls would certainly indicate that we've got a real race on our hands no matter what," Glisson said. "We're going to do the best that we can to win."

Glisson dismissed national criticism of Culver, such as a recent piece in the *Washington Post* saying that the governor is in deep electoral trouble. She said the author of that article isn't from Iowa. "We know what we need to do to win, and that's what we're focusing on," she said. "We're going to keep our eye on the prize and sort of focus on that. We're not going to get into the back-and-forth."

Conlin Still Expected to Win Senate Nomination Despite Recent Hits

Despite numerous hits taken in the past two weeks by Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Roxanne Conlin, political analysts and insiders still expect the former U.S. attorney and 1982 Democratic nominee for governor to easily win the nomination over Tom Fiegen and Bob Krause on Tuesday.

"If Fiegen or Krause were to come out of nowhere and come within 10 points, that would be shocking and bode poorly for Democrats in an already tough year," Goldford said.

A Research 2000 Iowa Poll of 600 likely Democratic-primary voters taken May 31 through June 2 and released Thursday evening by KCCI-TV showed Conlin backed by 48 percent of respondents, compared with 13 percent for Krause and 12 percent for Fiegen. The poll had a margin of error of 4 percentage points.

A separate poll of 406 likely Democratic-primary voters released this week by Public Policy Polling of Raleigh, North Carolina, produced similar results. It showed Conlin with 48 percent of the vote, with 31 percent undecided, Krause with 13 percent, and Fiegen at 8 percent. The poll had a margin of error of 4.9 percent. More than 70 percent of likely Democratic primary voters had no opinion of Krause or Fiegen, and both candidates are in negative territory among voters who do have an opinion.

But expect issues raised during the primary to come back to haunt Conlin in the general election, political analysts and insiders say. "She's got a base, especially among women in the party," Goldford said. "In some ways, she's Iowa's Hillary Clinton. But she carries baggage -- she carries major baggage."

In three televised candidate debates, Fiegen zinged Conlin on everything from tax credits to her lack of knowledge about agriculture to her connection with a Monsanto lobbyist. He later questioned her campaign expenditures on campaign office rent, makeup, a car wash, and a trip to Hawaii, although the Conlin campaign said most of those expenses were actually paid with Conlin's personal checkbook.

The *Des Moines Register* then endorsed Fiegen instead of Conlin, saying: "We were surprised and disappointed she was not knowledgeable about and so oversimplified the details of important policy." All of this hurt Conlin and a "lot of those ghosts will be resurrected in September and October," one insider said.

Goldford said: "When you're the presumptive front-runner, you might think it's not a primary; it's a coronation." But he said while Conlin "didn't blow anybody away" at the debates, her two opponents also lost a moment to re-frame the race. "The other two need a breakout moment,"

he said. "Absent of breakout moments, she probably will get that nomination."

Grassley Beats Conlin with PAC Money and Individual Donations

Whichever Democrat comes out of the three-way U.S. Senate primary will face an uphill battle against U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley, Iowa's senior senator who has never won less than 65 percent of vote.

As of May 19, Grassley had nearly $5.6 million in his campaign war chest, while Conlin, the top Democratic fundraiser, had $870,643. Meanwhile, Krause and Fiegen reported minimal fundraising activity during the pre-primary fundraising period. Krause raised just $2,343 while spending $2,063 to close with $632 in the bank. Fiegen raised even less, showing $1,230 in contributions, $1,412 in expenditures, and $400 in cash on hand.

According to Federal Election Commission reports, Grassley raised $422,636 for the filing period that ran from April 1 to May 19. The senator's campaign spent $213,956 and showed a debt of $13,216. Meanwhile, Conlin raised $185,476 and spent $315,288, while showing a debt of $250,000.

Grassley reported raising $150,450 from PACs; Conlin has said she would not take money from PACs and reported no PAC money.

However, Grassley also reported more individual donations than Conlin, and many of those were smaller donations. Grassley also some sizable donations, including receipts of $1,000 each from David M. Greenspon of Clive, who is president of Competitive Edge Inc., and orthopedic surgeon Donald Berg of Ottumwa.

PAC contributors to the Grassley campaign included Principal Life Insurance Company of Des Moines ($1,000); Abbott Laboratories Employees PAC of Abbott Park, Illinois ($1,000); HSBC North America PAC of Mettawa, Illinois ($1,000); and National Emergency Medicine PAC of

Irving, Texas ($1,000).

Although Conlin reported no money raised from PACs and showed significant contributions from individual Iowa donors such as Waterloo's Steven Abbott ($250), she was clearly benefiting from the generosity of her fellow attorneys nationwide. Among attorneys who gave to Conlin were Yvonne Flaherty of Farmington, Minnesota ($500); David H. Marsh of Birmingham, Alabama ($1,000); and John Shea of Richmond, Virginia ($500).

Bigger Primary turnout Expected Among Republicans; Secretary of State Race Expected to Be Close

Voter turnout is expected to be light in Tuesday's midterm primary election.

Iowa Secretary of State Michael Mauro predicts that about 20 percent of registered Republicans will turn out to vote -- about 150,000 to 200,000 voters -- and a lower percentage of registered Democrats will turn out, totaling about 100,000 to 125,000.

"I don't think any of the polling places will be overwhelmed with voters," Mauro told IowaPolitics.com. "All indications are that there's more activity on the Republican side. I think the Democratic turnout is going to be lower, much lower than the Republicans."

Absentee voting has provided an early indication of turnout patterns.

So far, with several highly contested races in next week's primary election, Republicans have been leading Democrats about three-to-one in requesting and returning absentee ballots.

Some Republicans say Democrats should be just as active with early voting because they've been trying to knock out Grassley for years, and the June 8 primary election ballot has a contested race at the top of the ticket (governor or U.S. Senate) for both Republicans and Democrats.

But Mauro said the only real contested race on the Democratic side is for U.S. Senate, in addition to the 5th Congressional District race. He said candidates drive turnout in the primary election because state political parties don't endorse. And because there are simply more contested races among Republicans, candidates such as Branstad and 3rd Congressional District candidate Brad Zaun are driving turnout in part by getting people to vote absentee, Mauro said.

"Several of the Republican campaigns have publicly said that that's something that they're interested in doing; they want to drive out that absentee ballot vote, which is obviously something the Democratic Party has been phenomenal at doing the last several years," said Culver campaign spokesperson Glisson. "But you know, I don't know how much it will play in this primary and what that means for the general election. I do think that once the coordinated campaign really gets underway, we'll have a lot of activity ... in terms of absentee voting, early voting, and obviously on Election Day."

Among statewide races, some say the Republican race for secretary of state will be worth watching Tuesday night. "That's going to be super competitive and very exciting to watch," one insider said.

The race boils down to Council Bluffs City Council member Matt Schultz and former state Representative George Eichhorn (R-Stratford). While there's been no word on internal polling in the race, Schultz has made a good impression on Republican primary voters who like fresh faces, an insider said. A third candidate, Chris Sanger of Des Moines, does not appear to be much of a contender.

On Wednesday, Schultz launched TV and radio spots across the state, following his Web ad that attacked Chicago-style politics. "With radio and TV, we are hoping to reach as many voters as we can to get out our message," he said. "We are running TV spots in at least six media markets across the state, and we are hitting radio at the same time."

Schultz's campaign announced Wednesday that former Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate, who is also a former Cedar Rapids mayor, will serve as his campaign's state chair. Meanwhile, Eichhorn's endorsements include Senate Republican Whip Steve Kettering (R-Lake View); former legislator and Republican Party of Iowa Chair Chuck Larson Jr.; and former Republican

National Committee member Steve Roberts.

Former IASB Official Explains Trip to Bora Bora

State lawmakers got an explanation Thursday about how $8,680 in taxpayer dollars were used to pay for a trip to Bora Bora by a former Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) executive - but many legislators weren't satisfied with the explanation they heard.

Kevin Schick, former chief financial officer of the IASB, and attorney Charles Gribble on Thursday told members of the legislature's Government Oversight Committee that he used the IASB credit card for his personal trip to Bora Bora after his personal credit card was compromised.

"The trip to Bora Bora was always my personal vacation. It was never intended for business," Schick told lawmakers. "I did not want public funds to be used for my personal trip. ... At no point did I want taxpayer money to pay for that."

Schick said repeatedly that the IASB credit card was really a personal credit card in his name, even though it used the IASB's name and address. He also maintained that taxpayer dollars were never used to pay for his trip because he reimbursed the IASB with two checks of $7,500 and $1,180 earlier this year.

"There were not public funds expended for the trip," Gribble said. "IASB was promptly reimbursed before they had to pay this."

But Representative Ralph Watts (R-Adel) pointed out that it took Schick a month to give the IASB the first check, for $7,500.

One of the committee's most vocal members, Senator Thomas Courtney (D-Burlington), was also unhappy with the explanation. "If it was your credit card, why'd you give them a check? Why didn't you just write a check to the credit-card company and pay it?" Courtney asked. "What kind of bookkeeping does the IASB have if they're paying other people's credit cards? ... This is the craziest thing I've ever heard of. What on earth are they doing paying for your credit card?"

Earlier in the day, one of the whistle-blowers who alerted the IASB Board to problems testified before lawmakers. Susie Olesen, director of Skills Iowa and a 10-year employee of the IASB who was paid $77,000 last year, told lawmakers how she alerted auditors to the problems, including a "double draw-down" of funds.

She described the stressful time last fall when IASB workers received an e-mail saying the association was in financial jeopardy and that a lot of people would lose their jobs. She also said she was "sworn to secrecy" and directed not to talk to the board.

Olesen wasn't fired from the IASB but was told to buy herself some lunch, pack up her things, and work out of home. She was also told that she'd be reporting to a separate not-for-profit rather than the IASB. "I was flabbergasted because no one had even talked to me about it," she said. "I felt like I wasn't welcome there anymore."

Former IASB Board President Jack Hill also testified before the committee, saying he was not aware that Schick had an IASB credit card. He also said he didn't recall signing the document that increased former Executive Director Maxine Kilcrease's salary from $210,000 to $367,000 without board approval. Kilcrease was fired in March.

On a personal note, Hill maintained that he resigned from the IASB and will also resign from the North Scott School Board after 19 years and as mayor of Long Grove due to personal reasons and not because of the IASB scandal. He said renters are leaving his daughter's Iowa City house in August, and he and his wife will be moving there in September. "My wife and I have been planning for several years that we wanted to end up in Iowa City," he said.

Candidates to Receive Petition from Pastors Against Same-Sex Marriage

All statewide and legislative candidates will receive a letter and petition signed by 834 Iowa pastors and ministry leaders in support of traditional marriage between a man and woman after the June 8 primary election, the Iowa Family Policy Center and Purpose Ministries announced outside the Iowa Capitol.

The groups have long been saying the 2010 elections will be a referendum on same-sex marriage. Iowa Family Policy Center President Chuck Hurley said that while all three Republican candidates for governor "give lip service" to being for traditional marriage, "only one has said that he will do something about it."

The Iowa Family Policy Center's political action committee has endorsed Bob Vander Plaats of Sioux City for governor. If he fails to win the Republican nomination, Hurley said "the fight goes on."

Hurley said the petition comes after 167 religious leaders he called "pseudo pastors" sent a petition in support of same-sex marriage to lawmakers earlier this year. "One thing legislators and lawmakers can do, even if they can't do many other things, is they can all count," Hurley said.

The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa late Tuesday responded to Hurley's reference to the 167 clergy members who signed on to the Interfaith Alliance of Iowa letter supporting same-sex marriage as "pseudo pastors."

"Interfaith Alliance of Iowa advocates for many things, but of highest priority is the need for civility in our public discussions," said Connie Ryan Terrell, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance of Iowa. "The Iowa Family Policy Center was disrespectful to the many clergy who chose to sign our letter supporting marriage equality for same-gender couples. We ask that IFPC retract its statement calling ordained and licensed clergy 'pseudo pastors' and show respect for the diversity of opinion held by clergy and other people of faith across our state."

Hurley later explained the term "pseudo pastors" as "someone who is a wolf in sheep's clothing ... someone who would lead their flock astray on issues of moral and particularly spiritual

matters. And certainly someone who would so directly violate the revealed word of God in all of the major faith traditions -- Jewish, Muslim, Christian -- would easily qualify as a false pastor or false shepherd."

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com , an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.