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Voters back Christie on pension cuts

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Gov. Chris Christie's proposals to cut state pension benefits won support from a majority of New Jersey voters, while 72 percent favored restoring the so-called millionaire's tax he vetoed, a Rutgers University poll shows.

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Voters surveyed supported cutting pension benefits for government workers 54 percent to 40 percent opposed, said the survey released Tuesday by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers. Respondents divided 48 percent in favor to 48 percent against on proposals to raise workers' health-insurance costs.

Bringing back a lapsed tax surcharge for residents with annual incomes of \$1 million or more was "strongly supported" by 52 percent of those asked, the poll said. Another 20 percent said they were "somewhat" in favor of restoring the levy, the survey showed. Christie, 48, a Republican who ended a Democrat-led attempt to reinstate the tax after the one-year surcharge ended, has said he'd veto it again.

"While voters are more than willing to have public employees see significant cuts in pension and health benefits, they also strongly believe the sacrifice should be shared," David Redlawsk, the poll's director, said in a statement released with the survey. "While the governor uses the mantra of shared sacrifice, voters specifically believe that costs should also be paid by those at the top of the income scale."

Christie, who took office last year after unseating Democrat Jon Corzine, has proposed a \$29.4 billion budget. Among those surveyed, 45 percent said they were somewhat or very pleased with the proposal while 48 percent were displeased with it, including 22 percent "very displeased," the poll said.

The spending plan assumes \$323 million in savings by raising the amount state employees pay for health insurance to 30 percent of the premiums by 2014. Christie has said he'll use part of the savings to increase residential property-tax rebates. He also proposed making a \$506 million payment into the state retirement system if his pension changes are passed.

Christie urged legislators in September to roll back a 9 percent pension-benefit increase from 2001, raise the minimum retirement age to 65 from 62, increase worker contributions and freeze cost-of-living raises. The steps would help cut the retirement system's projected \$53.9 billion unfunded liability.

Researchers at New Brunswick-based Rutgers surveyed 811 registered voters by landline and mobile telephone from Feb. 24- 26. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

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