

NJ split on proposed state budget

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New Jersey voters that paid attention to Gov. Chris Christie's proposed budget for the fiscal year 2012 appear to be split in their evaluation of it, according to a recent Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics poll.

A total of 45 percent of the voters polled confirmed to be "pleased" with the new budget, while 48 percent of respondents expressed their discontent.

"Because it is Gov. Christie, who has such an impact on the political environment, people are just aware and the media coverage is just intense," said David Redlawsk, poll director.

Those pleased with the new budget overwhelmingly cite Christie's budget-cutting decisions as well as his decision-making and leadership style as the two most crucial factors that contributed to their affirmation of the governor's proposal, according to the poll.

But results report that respondents who are displeased with the new budget are stressing that the proposed budget is not fair, as it appears to target the middle class, the working people, the poor or the elderly.

Poll responders are also displeased with the budget because of cuts to education, general cuts in spending and Christie's leadership style.

The budget's proposed spending on higher education reveals a \$25 million increase in tuition aid for college students, according to the poll.

But there is a \$4.7 million decrease in state funding for the New Jersey Student Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship program and a \$3 million decrease in other student aid programs, according to the poll.

Overall, the state funding of financial assistance is expected to rise by \$19.6 million, which is a 1 percent increase from last year, according to the poll. No spending cuts to the University or other senior public institutions have been announced.

"At the moment the University appears to be relatively protected," Redlawsk said. "The governor seems to recognize it is important to do more for higher education in the state."

The poll shows that a majority of respondents who confirmed their awareness of the new budget proposal also said the governor should be willing to compromise during the budget negotiations.

Such compromise may be achieved in the ensuing debate between Christie and the state's Democratic Senate President

Stephen Sweeney, Redlawsk said.

"The policies proposed by Sweeney and Christie are slightly different," he said. "When we talked [with respondents] about Christie, the policy was less supported than when we talked about Sweeney. But when we talked about it in a bipartisan way, it got the most support."

Redlawsk said bringing both sides together is what the people would like to see.

Christie's personality is an important factor in voters' awareness of the budget proposal, according to the poll.

John Malchow, a School of Arts and Sciences junior, said Christie has been honest and forthright about the budget cuts.

"The state of New Jersey needs large and forceful cuts at the moment," Malchow said. "Christie's ability and willingness to ensure these cuts does not appear to be undermined by his panache."

Voters are especially critical of the cuts to pensions and medical insurance of public sector workers, according to the poll.

Sabrina Arias, a School of Arts and Sciences first-year student, said Christie places the blame on public sector employees for the diminishing purchasing power of middle-class residents.

"In reality, the public sector employees are the ones who constitute a large portion of the state's middle-class population," Arias said.

The poll of 912 N.J. adults was conducted through both landline and cell phone households from Feb. 24 to 26, according to the Rutgers-Eagleton press release. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.3 percentage points.

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