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Democratic Support Slips Among Independents

Rutgers-Eagleton poll shows majority of New Jersey voters want to see Democrats remain in charge of the legislature

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Looking to the 2011 legislative elections New Jersey voters want to see Democrats remain in charge of the legislature, according to a new Rutgers-Eagleton Poll released Friday. Just over half of registered voters say they want Democrats to continue to act as a check on Gov. Chris Christie's plans, while 38 percent want Republicans to win so the Governor's proposals will not be blocked. The Democrats' 13-point margin represents an increase since early April when the margin was 9 points, but a decline from February when Democrats led by 17 points.

Democrats also lead Republicans by 10 points in generic ballot tests for the New Jersey General Assembly and the State Senate, but crucial independent voters are evenly split between parties.

"When thinking about the legislature versus the governor, voters prefer that Democrats remain able to balance Gov. Christie," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers University. "But when asked simply to consider their actual vote in Assembly and Senate races, they are somewhat less supportive of Democrats."

Results are from a Rutgers-Eagleton Poll of 615 registered voters conducted among both landline and cell phone households from August 9 - 15, with a margin of error for the full sample of +/- 3.9 percentage points.

Voters Want Democratic Control of the Legislature

Voters want Democrats to remain in control of the state legislature by a 51 to 38 percent margin, with 11 percent unsure, a small increase from early April's 48 to 39 percent margin supporting Democratic control. In February, however, voters were even more positive toward Democrats, with 54 percent preferring Democratic control in Trenton to 37 percent for Republicans.

Among partisan voters, 80 percent of each party wants their own party to win, but independents are increasingly divided in their responses and support for Democratic control. Forty-one percent of independents now say they want Republicans to win, while 43 percent say Democrats should be in charge. In the February Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, independent voters preferred Democratic control by a margin of 10 points, 48 to 38 percent.

"Support for Democratic control has bounced around for the last six months, while Republican support has remained nearly constant," said Redlawsk. "The uncertainty can be attributed to independent voters who supported Democratic control by 10 points in February, but who now only favor Democrats by 2 points. If Democratic candidates have trouble holding onto independents, more seats might be in play than expected."

Generic Ballot favors Democrats; Independents Split

In two generic ballot tests asking whether they plan to vote for Republicans or Democrats in their own legislative districts, 35 percent say they plan to vote for a Democrat for the New Jersey General Assembly, while 25 percent say they will vote for a Republican. Another 10 percent would like to vote for someone else, and 27 percent say they are unsure who they will choose.

Including unsure voters who lean one way or the other, 38 percent say they will vote for or lean toward Democrats and 29 percent will vote for or lean

Democrat compared to 31 percent voting for or leaning toward a Republican for their State Senator, and 19 percent remaining unsure.

More than 80 percent of partisan voters say they will vote for or lean toward voting for their own party this fall. Independents are slightly more likely to support Republicans for the General Assembly, with 26 percent favoring Republicans compared to 24 percent for Democrats, but this is well within the margin of error. For State Senate, independents are evenly split, 28 percent for a Republican and 28 percent for a Democrat.

Attitudes toward Gov. Christie seem to drive votes against Republicans more than for them. While 55 percent of voters holding a favorable opinion of Christie say they will vote or lean Republican in the Assembly vote this fall, 65 percent of those who dislike the governor plan to vote or lean Democratic. Similar results appear for the Senate, with 58 percent who like Christie supporting a Republican compared to 68 percent of those who hold a negative impression of Christie who lean or will vote Democratic.

Check the Governor or Not? Voters Send an Unclear Message

Despite wanting Democrats to stay in control of the legislature after the election so they can "act as a check" on Gov. Christie's plans, voters also prefer that the Democrats currently in the legislature work with the Governor rather than trying to resist him. A large majority (60 percent) says Democrats ought to work with the Governor, while only 30 percent believe Democrats should focus on resisting Christie's plans and act as a check on him.

Voters who do want the Democrats to resist are clearly unhappy with what they see, with 68 percent saying Democrats have not done enough to block Christie's policies. Only 21 percent of those who see the role of Democrats as balancing Christie's power say Democrats have done enough to fulfill this task.

"Voters are fed up with gridlock and clearly want politicians to work together," said Redlawsk. "Any time we ask about working together, we get large majorities in favor. So the same voters who tell us they want Democrats to win in Trenton so they can act as a check also tell us they still want Democrats to work with Gov. Christie now rather than resisting his plans. This is not so much an endorsement of everything the Governor wants to do as a strong desire to see compromise, not contention."

Among partisans, the response to whether Democrats should work with the Governor or resist him highlights a division among Democrats and shows cohesion among Republicans. While more than 80 percent of Republicans want Democrats to work with the Governor, Democrats are evenly split with 46 percent saying they want Democrats to provide a check on the Governor and 45 percent of Democrats saying they want their party to work with the Governor and not resist him. Among independents, 61 percent want the Democrats to work with the Governor and 29 percent want them to resist his plans.

Nearly all (88 percent) of those who hold a favorable impression of Gov. Christie want Democrats in Trenton to work with him, while only 6 percent think Democrats should resist him. Voters with a negative view of the governor are more split, with 56 percent wanting the Democrats to resist his plans, while 34 percent say Democrats should work with him even though they feel unfavorable toward the governor.

The Rutgers-Eagleton Poll was conducted by telephone from August 9-15, 2011 with a scientifically selected random sample of 615 New Jersey registered voters. Data are weighted to represent known parameters in the New Jersey population, using gender, age, race, and Hispanic ethnicity matching to US Census Bureau data. Data are also weighted to the current NJ voter registration records by party. All results are reported with these weighted data. This telephone poll included 574 landline respondents supplemented with 41 cell phone respondents, acquired through random digit dialing.

All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for 615 registered voters is +/-3.9 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval.

Thus if 50 percent of New Jersey voters favored a particular position, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 53.9 and 46.1 percent (50 +/-3.9) had all New Jersey voters been interviewed, rather than just a sample. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording or context effects.

This Rutgers-Eagleton Poll was fielded by the Eagleton Institute of Politics Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University using an in-house CATI system. The questionnaire was developed and all data analysis was completed in house. The Rutgers-Eagleton Poll is paid for and sponsored by the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, a non-partisan academic center focused on the study and teaching of politics and the political process.

Weighted Sample Characteristics 615 New Jersey Registered Voters

31% Democrat 50% Independent 19% Republican

50% Male 50% Female

14% 18-29 33% 30-49 29% 50-64 24% 65+

72% White 12% Black

9% Hispanic 4% Asian 3% Other/Multiracial

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