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Most New Jersey residents oppose Christie higher-education plan, poll shows

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A majority of New Jersey residents oppose Gov. Christie's plan to overhaul the state's public universities, according to a new poll.

In the statewide survey, conducted last week by Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, 57 percent of respondents said they were against Christie's proposal; 22 percent said they were for it.

The question referred to Christie's proposal in general but singled out his controversial proposal to merge Rutgers-Camden into Rowan University. It did not specifically mention other aspects of the plan, including the merger of Robert Wood Johnson Medical School into Rutgers.

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Since the Republican governor announced the plan last month, to create what he said would be a more competitive higher-education system in New Jersey - a goal of governors of both parties going back a decade - there has been resistance from Rutgers-Camden and Rutgers officials.

In the Eagleton poll, Republicans were generally more supportive of Christie's plan than Democrats, but only 32 percent of Republicans backed it.

"We never see something where all the demographic groups line up like they have here," said Rutgers-Eagleton poll director David Redlawsk. "Republican respondents always line up with" Christie.

The governor's office did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Alan Marcus, a consultant who has worked on GOP campaigns, said education is an issue that tends not to follow partisan lines.

"How many people have hands-on experience when it comes to tax policy? But they all went to school," he said. "And don't underestimate the power of the Rutgers alumni network."

The survey also asked respondents whether they would support a bond issue to pay for new and updated college facilities that could exceed \$1 billion. In 2002, a task force convened by former Gov. Jim McGreevey put the cost of a similar proposal at \$1.3 billion.

The results were close, with 48 percent saying they would support a bond issue and 45 percent saying

they would not.

The poll, released early Wednesday, followed a statement Tuesday by Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester) enthusiastically backing the governor's plan.

"Gov. Christie has shown true leadership in providing the framework for higher education in southern New Jersey to reach unprecedented heights," Sweeney said.

Earlier this month, the powerful legislative leader held back from publicly endorsing the proposal - which has the backing of Democratic leader George E. Norcross III - saying he had to wait and "see the details."

The statement from Sweeney's office also listed numerous Democratic elected officials from South Jersey as favoring the consolidation. It also said they would back efforts to ensure that students currently enrolled at Rutgers-Camden could keep that institution's name on their diplomas when they graduated.

Eagleton has been polling New Jersey residents since 1971, but on this survey the institute's connection to the subject matter meant giving special consideration to fairness, Redlawsk said.

"When we were developing the questions, we really beat around the questions' language. So it's as balanced as we can come up with," he said.

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