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# Rutgers-Eagleton Poll: Sure, Christie is Popular, but GOP Legislators May Find it Difficult to Ride his Coattails

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Despite concerns of many voters over the economy and taxes, support for Gov. Chris Christie's re-election continues to grow. According to the latest Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, 64 percent of New Jersey registered voters now say Christie should be re-elected, up five points from November 2012. Just over a quarter say it is time for someone new.

In a matchup against New Jersey state Senator Barbara Buono, the only declared Democratic candidate, Christie overwhelms Buono, 63 percent to

21 percent. He even scores a decisive win among voters most concerned about the economy and taxes, despite the disapproval of his handling of these issues reported by the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll last week.

"We continue to see strong support for the governor's re-election post-Sandy," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers University. "Christie is riding high on 86 percent approval of his handling of the storm. Consideration of his performance on the economy and taxes is so far on the back-burner that few voters are taking them into account in their voting decision."

Buono, on the other hand, faces an uphill battle on name recognition. Two-thirds of voters have no opinion of the challenger or admit they do not know who she is. Only 20 percent have a favorable impression of the likely Democratic nominee, while 13 percent have an unfavorable impression. Even so, this is a significant improvement since November, when 82 percent could not give an opinion on Buono and just 11 percent had a favorable impression of her.

"To her benefit, the 15-point improvement in name recognition has mostly come on the positive side," noted Redlawsk. "But Buono has a long way to go before voters know her

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well enough to give her serious consideration.”

Christie’s re-election support does not yet translate into good news for legislative Republicans in the aggregate. At this early stage, 25 percent of voters say they plan to vote for Republicans for the Legislature in 2013, while 40 percent say they will vote for Democrats. Not surprisingly, another quarter has no preference this early in the election season.

Results are from a poll of 796 adults conducted statewide among both landline and cell phone households from Jan. 30 – Feb. 3. Within this sample is a subsample of 698 registered voters reported on here; this subsample has a margin of error of +/- 3.7 percentage points.

### **Christie on winning streak with most voters, including Democrats**

As the 2013 election cycle begins, 15 percent of voters say they are following the gubernatorial election “very closely,” while another 33 percent are following it “somewhat closely.” But Christie’s lead is just as strong among those paying careful attention as those who admit they are paying little attention so far.

A plurality of Democrats, 47 percent, says Christie should be re-elected, while 40 percent say it is time for someone new. But 68 percent of independents and 87 percent of Republicans say the governor should be re-elected.

After closing in November, a small gender gap has reopened, with women eight points less likely than men to say Christie deserves another term, but that still leaves 60 percent of women on his side. Christie receives particularly strong support from the Sandy-battered exurban and shore regions (75 percent and 72 percent, respectively).

When matched against Buono, Christie still leads among Democrats, 42 percent to 38 percent. He also leads the head-to-head competition with 67 percent of independents and 93 percent of Republicans. With Buono on the ballot, the gender gap becomes slightly more pronounced, with women 10 points less likely than men to vote for Christie. At the same time, women are only one point more likely to vote for Buono, instead becoming more uncertain. As a result, Christie leads among men, 68 percent to 20 percent, and among women, 58 percent to 21 percent.

Even 35 percent of those who voted for former Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine in 2009 say they will vote for Christie over Buono, while Buono only holds 42 percent of Corzine voters.

### **Buono still mostly unknown**

Beyond Christie’s post-Sandy surge, Buono is significantly disadvantaged because she remains largely unknown statewide. Even 61 percent of Democratic voters have no impression of her. But 32 percent of Democrats are favorable while only 7 percent have an unfavorable impression. On the bright side for Buono, the percentage of Democrats favorable toward her has more than doubled since November, up 18 points.

Among independents, 74 percent have no opinion of Buono, 12 percent view her favorably and 14 percent are unfavorable. Buono remains unknown to 62 percent of Republicans, with another 14 percent favorable and 24 percent unfavorable. Buono is also mostly unknown among such typical Democratic supporters as women (69 percent), black voters (72 percent) and voters belonging to public union households (69 percent).

Buono’s Democratic base is somewhat split about her candidacy: 17 percent are very satisfied and 32 percent are somewhat so. Another 22 percent of Democrats are either somewhat or very unsatisfied while 29 percent are unsure.

“We would expect that as the campaign progresses Buono will become better known and Democrats, at least, will probably gravitate toward her,” said Redlawsk.

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“Republicans, of course, will stick with their guy, so the real question is whether Buono will peel away enough independents to pull off what looks right now like an improbable outcome.”

### Christie's coattails

Despite Christie's soaring popularity and poll numbers, GOP state legislators do not fare as well with voters; one-quarter of voters remain undecided and a generic question about party preferences for the Legislature puts Democrats up 15 points statewide.

Among voters who favor the governor's re-election, 34 percent plan to vote Republican, 28 percent will support Democrats and 29 percent remain unsure. Among those wanting Christie out, two-thirds will vote for Democrats in the Legislature, while only 11 percent will support Republicans. Sixteen percent are unsure.

Partisans are largely settled on their preferences: 76 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of Republicans will vote for legislative candidates of their own parties. Independents, however, remain uncertain, with 26 percent preferring Democrats, 18 percent favoring Republicans and 41 percent undecided. Statewide, Republicans get a plurality of voters only among those in the top income bracket (36 percent) and those living in the exurban and shore regions (39 percent and 31 percent, respectively).

“It's very early but the numbers we see across the state are at least as good for Democrats as we found throughout 2011, when generic ballot tests showed them up between 10 and 15 points,” said Redlawsk. “That year, Democrats held on to their majorities even as the governor campaigned for a Republican Legislature. While Christie's coattails could help some Republican candidates, the odds currently favor Democrats retaining legislative control.”



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