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Months after Sandy, NJ's Christie retains election edge: poll

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New Jersey Governor Chris Christie looks on while giving his State of the State address in the assembly chamber in Trenton (Carlo Allegri, Reuters)

By Edith Honan
Reuters

11:09 p.m. CDT, April 11, 2013

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - New Jersey Governor Chris Christie remains heavily favored to win re-election this November, although his lead over Democratic challenger state Senator Barbara Buono has fallen to 30 points from 42 in two months, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released on Friday.

The blunt-spoken Christie, who is seen as a strong contender if he decides to seek the Republican nomination for president in 2016, holds a lead of 57 percent to Buono's 27 percent.

The Republican governor saw his popularity skyrocket for appearing to put the needs of New Jersey above political considerations after superstorm Sandy crashed into the state's coastline late last year, smashing homes and wrecking boardwalks.

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New Jersey voters cheered his embrace of Democratic President Barack Obama, who aggressively backed the state's request for emergency aid, and later Christie's angry rebuke of Republican lawmakers for holding up those funds.

Nearly six months after the storm, some seven in 10 voters approve of Christie's overall job performance, while eight in 10 believe Christie will win a second term, the poll found. Even among Buono supporters, 61 percent expect Christie will win.

"As of now, the Sandy performance is overriding anything else," said David Redlawsk, the poll's director. Christie's bump "has already lasted longer than I would have anticipated."

Christie's standing has still slipped, although mostly among the Democrat-leaning state's more liberal voters. Among registered voters, his support has dropped six points since February 12, the date of the last Rutgers-Eagleton poll. Buono, who has struggled with low name recognition, picked up six points during that period, the poll found.

Seven in 10 voters have no opinion of Buono, while 18 percent take a favorable opinion and 12 percent are unfavorable.

"Buono has clearly made progress, but so far she's only convinced the voters who were always likely to vote against Christie," Redlawsk said. "Unless Buono can make gains among independents and also get Democrats energized, she is going to have a long road ahead."

While Buono has made inroads with voters, her gains have been among more liberal voters, while independents remain firmly in Christie's camp, Redlawsk said.

Buono, who authored New Jersey's anti-bullying law, now holds an 18-point lead among Democrats, whereas in February Christie led Buono by four points among Democratic voters.

"She can't afford to give Christie a quarter of black voters, a majority of women and even a third of liberals, as she does right now," Redlawsk said.

In spite of Christie's high ratings, voters are not overwhelmingly positive about his record on jobs and the economy, where he has 42 percent approval, and taxes, where he has 37 percent approval.

The survey of 923 New Jersey adults, including 819 registered voters, was conducted statewide from April 3-7 and had a margin of error of 3.7 percentage points.

(Editing by Cynthia Johnston and Andre Grenon)

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Table with 4 columns: Candidate Name, Party, Votes, and Percentage. Includes Robin Kelly (D) with 58,142 votes (70.8%), Paul McKinley (R) with 18,072 votes (22.0%), Elizabeth "Liz" Pahlke (I) with 2,477 votes (3.0%), LeAlan M. Jones (G) with 1,505 votes (1.8%), Marcus Lewis (I) with 1,345 votes (1.6%), and Curtiss Llong Bey (I) with 539 votes (0.7%).



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