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Christie as Popular as Obama, Less Among Women, Poll Says

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By Terrence Dopp

(Updates with undecided respondents in fourth paragraph.)

March 7 (Bloomberg) -- Chris Christie, New Jersey's first-term governor, is essentially tied with President Barack Obama as the "hottest" sitting U.S. politician in a Quinnipiac University Poll's "national thermometer" reading.

The survey, released today, said the two get different rankings from men and women. Compared with males, females said they felt warmer about the Democratic president than the Republican governor. The reverse was true among the men.

Christie, whose provocative arguments with teachers and other union members over their pay and benefits have been captured in YouTube videos, received an overall rating of 57 degrees, while Obama scored 56.5, the poll showed. In a March 2 National Review interview, Christie, 48, said he thought he could beat Obama in 2012 if he were to run. The governor has repeatedly said he won't seek his party's nomination next year.

Christie "has clearly made a positive impression on the American people, at least the half who are familiar with him," said Peter A. Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. Among those surveyed, 55 percent said they didn't know enough about him to form an opinion.

"This measure is not any kind of presidential trial heat, but it does reflect how voters feel about national figures, including politicians," Brown said in a statement with the results. The telephone poll of 1,887 voters from Feb. 21-28 had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.3 percentage points.

Kevin Roberts, a Christie spokesman, declined to comment today in response to an e-mail about the survey.

'Feeling' Rating

The poll asked voters to rate their sentiments toward 23 public figures, including politicians. Respondents rated leaders 0 to 100 degrees on a "feeling thermometer." The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable a person said they felt toward the subject. Lower figures meant colder, or less favorable, feelings, according to Quinnipiac.

Christie's highest marks came from Republicans, who gave him a temperature of 70.2 degrees, while 64 percent of women, 60 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of independents said they didn't know enough about him, according to the poll.

No one failed to rate Obama, 49, because of a lack of information, the results show. Among women respondents, 60.4 had warm feelings about Obama, while among men, that reading dropped to 51.9, the poll showed.

Women's Issues

Female voters have gravitated toward the Democratic Party since 1980, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. More than even the hot-button issue of abortion, women tend to view protecting social safety-net programs as the prime reason for their support, said Walsh, who has studied so-called gender-gap issues among voters.

"What you find in the head-to-head, horse-race kinds of polls, when you ask people who they prefer, women are a little more likely to support the Democratic candidate," Walsh said today in a telephone interview. "Even if they don't think government is working all that well, men want to smash it and women want to tweak it."

In Christie's case, his calls for spending cuts may have done more to drive off women than anything else, Walsh said. As a group, women tend to feel more economically vulnerable and support politicians who back safety-net programs, she said.

Women may be put off by Christie's cuts in spending on education, which many women see as pivotal for their support, Walsh said. If the governor's budget moves also may put off female voters if they are perceived as harmful to safety-net programs, she said.

Unready, So Far

While 35 percent of women in the poll gave Obama a temperature rating between 81 degrees and 100 degrees, the warmest, only 7 percent felt that way about the governor.

Christie's approval rating in his home state also is lower among women. In a Feb. 9 Quinnipiac poll of New Jersey voters, 52 percent approved of Christie, including 58 percent of men and 46 percent of women.

Since taking office in January 2010, Christie has closed a \$10.7 billion budget deficit without raising taxes, killed a proposed commuter-rail tunnel to Manhattan and clashed with unions representing teachers and government workers.

Christie has campaigned for Republicans in other states and has been asked repeatedly about presidential ambitions. He has said he isn't ready for the job.

Christie beat several other possible Republican challengers in today's poll, including Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and former Governors Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota.

Lowest and Highest

Sarah Palin, the 2010 Republican vice presidential nominee turned Fox News commentator, was 21st on the list at 38.2 degrees. Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, was last at 32.9, while First Lady Michelle Obama was on top, at 60.1 degrees, followed by former President Bill Clinton, at 59.2 degrees, the results show.

Patrick Murray, who teaches politics at Monmouth University and directs its polling center in West Long Branch, said the so-called likability factor becomes more critical to politicians as they move up the ladder of elective office. Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry, who both lost close-call presidential elections to Republican George W. Bush, are examples of politicians who failed to win over voters, he said. Republicans Bob Dole and John McCain also showed the importance of a connection with the electorate, Murray said today in an interview.

"For a presidential candidate, there really has to be some likability quotient there," Murray said. "They don't need to be able to sit down in a bar and have a beer with them, but voters have to feel like they are able to talk to them."

Researchers surveyed 1,887 registered voters from Feb. 21-28 for the poll.

Following are the mean scores on Hamden, Connecticut-based Quinnipiac's "feeling thermometer" and the percent who said they didn't know enough to rate each subject:

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