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New UMass Amherst / WCVB Poll Finds Baker Approval Rebounding, Buoyed by Strong Views of Bay State Economy

Half of those polled see Massachusetts heading in the right direction for the first time since August 2020, while 52% still see the nation on the wrong track

Topline results and crosstabs for the poll can be found at www.umass.edu/poll

AMHERST, Mass. – A new statewide University of Massachusetts Amherst / WCVB Poll released today finds Gov. Charlie Baker's approval rebounding from his March 2021 low, buoyed by growing optimism about the Commonwealth's economy and his handling of the COVID pandemic.

The poll of 750 Massachusetts residents conducted Nov. 9-16 found that 56% of respondents approve of the way Baker is doing his job, which while still down significantly from the 78% approval he held in August 2020 is four points higher than the 52% approval rating he held in a UMass Amherst / WCVB Poll conducted this past March.

With Baker yet to declare whether he will run for re-election to a third term in the 2022 election, two-thirds of the poll's respondents say he has met or exceeded their expectations as governor, and 69% say that the Bay State is the same or better off than it was prior to Baker taking office in 2015.

"Gov. Baker remains a singularly popular Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic state," says Tatishe Nteta, associate professor of political science at UMass Amherst and director of the poll. "While his approval is down from the record highs seen in 2020, a majority of the residents of the commonwealth approve of the job that he has done in office and his approval ratings have rebounded from March of 2021, when he faced criticism for his handling of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and his support for continued restrictions on businesses in the commonwealth."

The new poll found 67% of respondents believe Baker is handling the pandemic well, up seven points from the spring, and 59% say that he has handled the economy well. More than half (53%) rate the Massachusetts economy as good or excellent, compared to only 32% who feel the same way about the national economy. Just 13% say the state of the commonwealth's economy is "poor," while more than double that number (27%) feel as

such about the national economy. Asked about their own economic situation, 47% of the poll's respondents indicated they viewed their situation as good or excellent, while 35% say their personal situation is "fair" and 18% "poor."

Overall, 50% of respondents believe things in Massachusetts are going in the right direction, up from 47% in the March poll, while 52% see things nationally on the wrong track, in line with the 51% who responded similarly in March.

"Gov. Baker is viewed as particularly strong in terms of his handling of the economy, and his management of this critical issue is likely the primary source of his political success," says Jesse Rhodes, professor of political science at UMass Amherst and associate director of the poll. "If Baker has weak points, they would be on transportation and housing issues, where Massachusetts residents rate him less positively. Transportation is a perennial issue in the state, and housing has become increasingly salient due to rising housing prices and rents during the pandemic."

While Baker holds solid approval ratings across nearly all demographics, the Republican's softest support is actually with members of his own party, with just a 41% approval rating among GOP voters and 49% of them saying he has fallen short of their expectations. Nearly half of all Republicans (48%) – and more than half of conservatives (51%) and Trump voters (56%) – surveyed in the new poll actually perceive Baker as an ideological liberal, rather than as a moderate or conservative. Among Democrats and independents, he carries 65% and 48% approval ratings, respectively, and nearly three-quarters of moderates (74%) approve of the job he has done. Baker also holds a higher approval rating among people of color (58%) than with whites (55%).

"Across demographic and political groups, Gov. Baker is viewed in a positive light, a true feat for a Republican in one of the bluest states in the nation," Nteta says, "but he has a problem with his supposed base of voters in the Republican Party. When given the opportunity, conservatives, Republicans and Trump voters all express their disdain and disappointment with the governor's leadership. While this may not affect him in the general election, he may have an issue connecting to Republican voters in a primary if he chooses to run in 2022."

"Baker has earned the enmity of conservatives for his compromises with liberals, and with Trump voters for his wonkish, good government approach," says Raymond La Raja, professor of political science at UMass Amherst and associate director of the poll. "The most popular word used to describe him among these groups is 'RINO' – Republican in Name Only – while other voters tend to label him 'competent.'

"Still, he is in an enviable position if he seeks a third term," La Raja says. "He is liked by voters across virtually all groups, and with plenty of money to circulate throughout the state. That's a double-barreled challenge for anyone choosing to compete against him. The last governor to have three terms was Michael Dukakis, and he had to lose before he could return to office. He was also not very popular in his third term, after having run for the presidency."

Biden's Softening Support

Reflecting the tepid views of the state of the nation, President Joe Biden's approval among Massachusetts voters dropped five points from March, from 61% to 56%, while his disapproval numbers increased from 34% to 41%. Biden's approval numbers mirror the views of his handling for the pandemic, as 59% approve of his pandemic response in the new poll, down five points from March. Those indicating a belief he has not handled the pandemic too well or not well at all increased from 31% in March to 39% in the latest poll; only 27% of the new poll's respondents believe Baker is handling the pandemic poorly, while 37% felt that way eight months ago.

Overall, the poll's respondents once again found that the pandemic has been best handled locally, as 69% approve of their local governments' reaction – identical to the March poll – while the Massachusetts Legislature's response to the pandemic holds a 59% approval, up seven points from March. Although the U.S. Congress holds just a 36% approval rating for its handling of the pandemic, the mark is still five points higher than it received in March.

"Although the Massachusetts state Legislature is perceived by Massachusetts residents as very liberal, a solid majority of residents approve of its performance – an unusually strong showing given that people are often critical of their legislatures," Rhodes says. "Massachusetts residents are particularly positive in their evaluations of the state Legislature's handling of the COVID pandemic, which likely explains their strong overall evaluation."

Methodology

This University of Massachusetts Amherst / WCVB Poll of 750 residents of Massachusetts was conducted by YouGov Nov. 9-16. YouGov interviewed 773 respondents statewide who were then matched down to a sample of 750 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) one-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements, using the person weights on the public use file.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity and years of education. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 and 2020 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories) and education (4-categories) to produce the final weight.

The margin of error within this poll is 4.3%.

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