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CHRISTIE BUDGET: TOUGH, BUT NOT ALL THAT FAIR

Governor not winning public opinion battle with NJEA

When Governor Chris Christie unveiled his first state budget last month, he claimed the cuts were tough but fair. The latest *Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll* finds that Garden State residents agree with only half of that assessment. The cuts may be tough, but New Jerseyans see some groups, including teachers, as being disproportionately hurt. The poll also finds the governor coming up with the short end of the stick in his battle with the state teachers' union.

Governor Christie's job rating currently stands at 41% approve to 44% disapprove among all state residents, and 42% to 44% among registered voters. As a comparison, 34% of New Jerseyans gave thumbs up to the prior governor, Jon Corzine, at the same point in his term, while 37% gave a negative rating.

The driving force behind public opinion on the governor is his budget plan, something that an overwhelming 9-in-10 New Jerseyans have been paying some attention to. Governor Christie's proposal gets mixed reviews. Among those aware of Christie's budget plan, 46% say that his proposal is the product of tough and thoughtful choices, while an identical 46% see it as more of the same old political dealings. This may not represent an overwhelming endorsement of the incumbent's plan, but it is decidedly more positive than opinion of Jon Corzine's first budget, which only 32% saw as tough and thoughtful, compared to fully 60% who felt it was the product of backroom deals.

Furthermore, 22% of the public say they are satisfied with Chris Christie's budget plan and another 32% say they can live with it even if they are not necessarily satisfied. However, a sizable 44% report being dissatisfied with the governor's proposal. Again, these numbers are not great, but slightly better than his predecessor's – only 10% of New Jerseyans were satisfied with Corzine's initial budget, while 41% were dissatisfied.

“The difference between Christie and Corzine is that the Democrat’s budgets didn’t require much sacrifice on the part of the average New Jerseyan. Christie’s cuts inflict a good deal of pain, with some groups seen as being hit harder than others,” said Murray.

Only 1-in-4 (26%) of those who are aware of the budget say that the governor’s plan spreads the pain of cuts fairly among all groups, whereas fully 2-in-3 (68%) say that some groups will suffer unfairly. When asked to identify which groups are being disproportionately affected, poll participants name the middle class (39%), the poor (29%), and teachers (30%) as the hardest hit. Another 19% identify children, 9% say seniors, 6% point to state workers and 5% to property tax payers as suffering most unfairly from these cuts.

When asked specifically about the governor’s proposed cuts in state aid to towns and school districts, more than half (52%) feel those cuts are unfair in comparison to cuts made in other areas of the budget. Only 28% say these cuts in local aid are fair.

“The local aid reduction, particularly to schools, was always going to be the flashpoint for criticism of the plan, and the governor’s clash with the NJEA only increased the heat. If part of his strategy was to win over public opinion, it hasn’t been an overwhelming success,” said Murray.

About 8-in-10 New Jerseyans are aware of the ongoing war of words between Governor Christie and the state teachers’ union over these budget cuts. And a large majority (69%) of this group says that the tenor of the “debate” has been negative.

When asked who is more to blame for the negative tone, 34% point to the governor, while fewer – 23% – lay the blame at the NJEA’s feet. Another 40% say that both are equally to blame. Of course, these statewide results also include the views of teachers. The governor fares only slightly better among non-teacher/state worker households, where 28% blame Christie more, 27% blame the union more, and 42% blame both parties equally.

Many school boards across the state asked their local teachers’ unions to reopen their contracts in order to avoid layoffs, but only 11 agreed. Therefore, quite a few school districts will be reducing their teacher workforce to balance their budgets next year. When asked who is most responsible for causing these layoffs, Governor Christie (44%) is more likely to get the blame than either the teachers’ unions (28%) or the local school boards (18%). Even when teacher and state worker households are removed from the poll analysis, the governor still shoulders more blame (40%) than either the unions (31%) or the school boards (19%).

“The governor may have miscalculated when he took on the NJEA so vociferously. In the battle for the hearts and minds of New Jersey, the union has a secret weapon. And that’s the teachers themselves,” said Murray.

One key benchmark in this debate will be the outcome of the school board and budget elections taking place a week from today. Voter turnout in school elections is notoriously poor, usually running in the low to mid teens. However, if they decided to head to the polls this year, 29% of New Jersey voters say they would approve their local school budget, while 37% would vote to defeat it. Another 34% offer no opinion. In last year's school board elections, 54% of the votes cast on school budgets statewide were in the affirmative, compared to just 46% in the negative.

“Those who vote in school elections tend to be a particularly interested subset of all voters. But if turnout is higher than normal and these initial indications pan out, it could be a very bad year for passing school budgets,” said Murray.

In other poll findings, 30% of New Jerseyans say that Governor Christie's budget plan will cause their own family a lot of economic hardship, 45% say that it will cause them some hardship, and 22% say there will not really be any hardship for them. Among state worker and teacher households, 43% say they will suffer a lot of hardship.

Most New Jerseyans (55%) continue to say that the state is on the wrong track rather than headed in the right direction (37%), although these findings are slightly more positive than they have been for the past two years.

The state legislature also continues to get poor marks from the public. Only 20% approve of the job this body is doing compared to 56% who disapprove.

While the governor won last year's election on a campaign of change, few New Jerseyans have yet to see a positive transformation in their state government. Just 21% say that the overall quality of government in Trenton has gotten better in the past year, but more – 31% – say it has actually gotten worse. Another 42% say there has been no change so far in the quality of state government.

The *Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll* was conducted by telephone with 804 New Jersey adults from April 7 to 11, 2010. This sample has a margin of error of ± 3.5 percent. The poll was conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute and originally published by the Gannett New Jersey newspaper group (Asbury Park Press, Courier-Post, Courier News, Daily Journal, Daily Record, and Home News Tribune).

DATA TABLES

The questions referred to in this release are as follows:

(* Some columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.)

1. Would you say things in New Jersey are going in the right direction, or have they gotten off on the wrong track?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER			PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No	
Right direction	37%	37%	38%	22%	42%	53%	29%	39%	
Wrong track	55%	56%	49%	69%	51%	40%	61%	53%	
(VOL) Depends	5%	4%	6%	5%	4%	3%	6%	4%	
(VOL) Don't know	4%	3%	7%	4%	3%	3%	4%	4%	
Unwtd N	804	719	85	269	316	199	193	611	

TREND: All adults	April 2010	February 2010	February 2009	September 2008	July 2007	April 2007	February 2007	September 2006	July 2006	April 2006	September 2005
Right direction	37%	29%	21%	26%	39%	33%	34%	29%	27%	30%	31%
Wrong track	55%	56%	72%	64%	50%	51%	55%	58%	62%	55%	54%
(VOL) Depends	5%	5%	3%	4%	6%	8%	6%	6%	4%	9%	5%
(VOL) Don't know	4%	9%	4%	6%	6%	8%	6%	7%	7%	6%	10%
Unwtd N	804	803	803	808	800	804	801	800	802	803	800

2. Do you approve or disapprove of the job Chris Christie is doing as governor?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER			PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No	
Approve	41%	42%	31%	19%	49%	65%	30%	44%	
Disapprove	44%	44%	44%	68%	34%	19%	57%	41%	
(VOL) Don't know	15%	13%	25%	13%	16%	16%	14%	15%	
Unwtd N	804	719	85	269	316	199	193	611	

TREND: All adults	April 2010	February 2010
Approve	41%	33%
Disapprove	44%	15%
(VOL) Don't know	15%	52%
Unwtd N	804	803

TREND: Registered voters	April 2010	February 2010
Approve	42%	31%
Disapprove	44%	15%
(VOL) Don't know	13%	53%
Unwtd N	719	716

3. Do you approve or disapprove of the job the state legislature is doing?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER			PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No	
Approve	20%	19%	25%	16%	23%	22%	19%	20%	
Disapprove	56%	57%	51%	58%	54%	55%	59%	55%	
(VOL) Don't know	24%	24%	25%	26%	23%	23%	22%	25%	
Unwtd N	804	719	85	269	316	199	193	611	

TREND: All Adults	April 2010	February 2010	July 2009	February 2009	September 2008	July 2008	April 2008	March 2008	October 2007	February 2007
Approve	20%	26%	30%	25%	29%	27%	29%	28%	33%	35%
Disapprove	56%	46%	47%	52%	47%	45%	53%	50%	41%	40%
(VOL) Don't know	24%	28%	23%	23%	23%	28%	18%	22%	26%	25%
Unwtd N	804	803	923	803	808	1004	803	805	801	801

TREND: Registered Voters	April 2010	February 2010	July 2009	February 2009	September 2008	July 2008	April 2008	March 2008	October 2007	February 2007
Approve	19%	24%	31%	23%	29%	27%	28%	25%	32%	34%
Disapprove	57%	49%	48%	55%	50%	47%	55%	53%	43%	42%
(VOL) Don't know	24%	27%	22%	22%	21%	26%	17%	22%	25%	23%
Unwtd N	719	716	792	721	709	889	720	719	688	681

4. Do you think that the overall quality of government in Trenton has gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same compared to a year ago?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Better	21%	21%	18%	13%	23%	32%	22%	21%
Worse	31%	31%	29%	43%	26%	16%	40%	28%
Same	42%	41%	48%	40%	44%	43%	31%	46%
(VOL) Don't know	6%	7%	5%	4%	7%	9%	8%	6%
Unwtd N	804	719	85	269	316	199	193	611

5. How much have you heard or read about Governor Christie's state budget plan – a lot, a little, or nothing at all?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
A lot	45%	47%	31%	44%	47%	43%	59%	41%
A little	44%	45%	38%	44%	40%	50%	37%	46%
Nothing at all	11%	8%	32%	12%	12%	7%	4%	13%
Unwtd N	804	719	85	269	316	199	193	611

TREND: CORZINE ADMINISTRATION	March 2008	April 2006
A lot	33%	25%
A little	50%	49%
Nothing at all	17%	27%
Unwtd N	805	803

[THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WERE ASKED OF THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD AT LEAST A LITTLE ABOUT THE BUDGET: moe= ± 3.6%]

6. How would you describe your reaction to the governor's budget plan – would you say you are satisfied with it, not particularly satisfied but you can live with it, or you are definitely dissatisfied with it?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Satisfied	22%	22%	18%	5%	27%	41%	17%	23%
Can live with it	32%	31%	34%	31%	33%	32%	22%	35%
Dissatisfied	44%	45%	40%	61%	37%	27%	60%	39%
(VOL) Don't know	2%	2%	8%	4%	2%	1%	1%	3%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

TREND: CORZINE ADMINISTRATION	March 2008	April 2006
Satisfied	10%	10%
Can live with it	34%	45%
Dissatisfied	54%	41%
(VOL) Don't know	2%	4%
Unwtd N	805	613

7. In general, would you describe the governor's budget plan as: the product of tough, thoughtful choices - OR - more of the same old political dealings? [ITEMS WERE ROTATED]

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Tough, thoughtful choices	46%	47%	40%	31%	50%	68%	38%	49%
Same old political dealings	46%	46%	53%	60%	43%	29%	50%	45%
(VOL) Some of both	2%	2%	0%	1%	2%	1%	3%	1%
(VOL) Don't know	6%	5%	7%	8%	5%	3%	9%	4%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

TREND: CORZINE ADMINISTRATION	March 2008	April 2006
Tough, thoughtful choices	27%	32%
Same old political dealings	62%	60%
(VOL) Some of both	5%	n/a
(VOL) Don't Know	6%	7%
Unwtd N	695	613

8. In general, do you think the governor's budget spreads the pain of cuts fairly among all groups or will some groups suffer unfairly from these cuts?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Spread fairly	26%	26%	26%	10%	34%	42%	17%	29%
Some will suffer unfairly	68%	67%	69%	84%	60%	52%	81%	63%
(VOL) Don't know	6%	6%	5%	6%	6%	6%	3%	7%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

[The following question was asked only of those who said "some will suffer unfairly" to Q8, moe= ± 4.5%]

9. Which groups will suffer most unfairly from these cuts? [Note: Results add to more than 100% because multiple responses were accepted]

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Middle class residents	39%	37%	54%	39%	43%	28%	46%	35%
Poor residents	29%	28%	34%	34%	29%	13%	24%	30%
Wealthy residents	2%	3%	0%	2%	4%	1%	2%	3%
Property tax payers	5%	4%	8%	2%	9%	4%	2%	6%
State workers	6%	6%	1%	5%	8%	5%	11%	4%
Teachers	30%	32%	13%	28%	31%	36%	36%	28%
Unions	2%	1%	6%	2%	1%	3%	4%	1%
Senior citizens, elderly	9%	10%	4%	11%	7%	9%	7%	10%
Children	19%	20%	10%	20%	14%	24%	20%	18%
Schools and libraries	3%	3%	1%	2%	2%	7%	2%	3%
Police and fire	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	5%	2%	2%
Other	7%	8%	3%	10%	3%	8%	11%	6%
(VOL) Don't know	5%	4%	12%	6%	3%	5%	5%	5%
Unwtd N	467	423	44	199	174	83	145	322

10. How much of an economic hardship do you think this budget will cause your own family – a lot, a little, or not really any hardship?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Lot of hardship	30%	30%	25%	37%	28%	22%	43%	26%
Little hardship	45%	45%	50%	41%	49%	47%	42%	46%
Not really a hardship	22%	22%	18%	17%	21%	29%	12%	25%
(VOL) Don't know	3%	3%	7%	5%	3%	2%	3%	3%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

11. Governor Christie's budget plan includes cuts in aid to local school districts and towns. Compared to how much other programs and spending have been reduced in the state budget, do you think that the amount local aid has been cut is basically fair or unfair, or don't you have an opinion?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Fair	28%	29%	22%	13%	33%	47%	20%	31%
Unfair	52%	51%	54%	68%	45%	34%	63%	48%
No opinion	20%	19%	24%	19%	22%	19%	17%	21%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

12. New Jersey voters will be asked to approve local school budgets later this month. Based on what you know or have heard about your local school budget, would you vote for or against it this year, or do you have no opinion?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
For	28%	29%	23%	26%	27%	33%	36%	26%
Against	37%	37%	36%	38%	37%	34%	37%	37%
No opinion	35%	34%	41%	36%	36%	33%	27%	37%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

13. Many school districts will be laying off teachers to balance the budget next year. Who is most responsible for causing these layoffs– Governor Christie, the local school board, or the teachers' union? [CHOICES WERE ROTATED]

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Governor Christie	44%	44%	47%	63%	35%	26%	57%	40%
The local school board	18%	17%	22%	15%	21%	18%	13%	19%
The teachers' union	28%	28%	26%	12%	31%	49%	19%	31%
(VOL) Combination	4%	4%	3%	5%	5%	1%	4%	4%
(VOL) Other	2%	2%	0%	1%	4%	1%	2%	2%
(VOL) Don't know	5%	5%	2%	4%	4%	6%	5%	5%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

14. How much have you heard about the public debate between the governor and the state teachers' union over these budget cuts – a lot, a little, or nothing at all?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER / TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
A lot	37%	38%	22%	31%	42%	39%	56%	31%
A little	50%	49%	64%	54%	47%	48%	34%	55%
Nothing at all	13%	13%	14%	15%	11%	13%	11%	14%
Unwtd N	738	674	64	244	291	185	187	551

[The following question was asked only of those who said “a lot” or “a little” to Q14, moe= ± 3.9%]

15. Would you characterize this debate as being generally positive or negative?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER/ TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Positive	21%	21%	24%	15%	21%	31%	12%	24%
Negative	69%	69%	65%	75%	69%	56%	83%	64%
(VOL) Both	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%	6%	1%	5%
(VOL) Neither	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%
(VOL) Don't know	5%	5%	7%	5%	5%	6%	4%	6%
Unwt'd N	642	589	53	206	258	164	170	472

[The following question was asked only of those who said “negative” or “both” to Q15, moe= ± 4.5%]

16. Who is more at fault for the negative tone – Governor Christie, the teachers’ union, or both equally?

	TOTAL	REGISTERED VOTER		PARTY ID			STATE WORKER/ TEACHER HOUSEHOLD	
		Yes	No	Dem	Ind	Rep	Yes	No
Christie	34%	33%	43%	53%	24%	15%	49%	28%
Teachers' union	23%	24%	16%	7%	26%	52%	12%	27%
Both equally	40%	41%	33%	38%	47%	30%	36%	42%
(VOL) Don't know	3%	2%	8%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Unwt'd N	469	431	38	162	192	104	143	326

The Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll was conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute on April 7-11, 2010 with a statewide random sample of 804 adult residents. Sampling and data collection services were provided by Braun Research, Inc. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling has a maximum margin of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported by gender or party identification, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

POLL DEMOGRAPHICS (weighted)			
40% Dem	48% Male	28% 18-34	65% White
38% Ind	52% Female	42% 35-54	13% Black
22% Rep		30% 55+	14% Hispanic
			8% Asian/Other

It is the Monmouth University Polling Institute’s policy to conduct surveys of all adult New Jersey residents, including voters and non-voters, on issues that affect the state. Specific voter surveys are conducted when appropriate during election cycles.

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