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Benson Has Early Lead in Governor's Race

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April 29, 2004

DURHAM, N.H. -- Gov. Craig Benson enjoys a wide lead over his two prospective Democratic challengers for Governor of New Hampshire. Benson's approval and favorability ratings remain strong. Education funding and the economy are the most important problem facing the state of New Hampshire.

These findings are based on the latest Granite State Poll, conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center. The University of New Hampshire sponsors the Granite State Poll. Five hundred and forty-two (542) randomly selected adults were interviewed by telephone between April 19 and April 26, 2004. The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/-4.3 percent. (For more detailed results, visit the Survey Center web site at www.unh.edu/survey-center and click on Press Releases.)

Gubernatorial Approval

The past several months have not held a lot of positive news for the Benson administration. The state is facing another round of budget cuts, a volunteer in the Governor's office has been accused of improprieties related to the awarding of health insurance contracts, and a golf course in which the governor is a major investor is heading into bankruptcy.

But despite these setbacks, Governor Benson's approval rating has increased slightly since February. In the most recent Granite State Poll, 54 percent of New Hampshire adults say they approve of the job he has done as governor, 28 percent disapprove, and 18 percent are neutral. In the February Granite State Poll, 52 percent approved of the job Benson has done as governor.

"Governor Benson has so far weathered a series of political and personal storms," stated Andrew Smith, director of the UNH Survey Center. "However, he can be sure that a number of these issues will resurface as the election campaign heats up."

Benson's personal favorability ratings have also increased somewhat since March. Currently 58 percent of New Hampshire adults say they have a favorable opinion of Benson, 25 percent have an unfavorable opinion, 11 percent are neutral, and 5 percent don't know enough about him to say. In February, 55 percent of New Hampshire adults said they had a favorable opinion of Benson.

2004 Gubernatorial Election

There are currently two Democrats who have thrown their hats into the ring to unseat Governor Benson in November's election -- former N.H. Attorney General Phil McLaughlin and N.H. House Minority Leader Peter Burling. Despite having been involved in government for some years, both men have little name recognition at this time in the campaign season.

In the most recent Granite State Poll, 13 percent of New Hampshire adults say they have a favorable opinion of Burling, 5 percent have an unfavorable opinion of him, 9 percent are neutral, and 73 percent don't know enough about him to say.

McLaughlin is slightly better known. Twenty-four percent said they have a favorable opinion of McLaughlin, 6 percent have an unfavorable opinion of him, 12 percent are neutral, and 58 percent don't know enough about him to say. Burling, McLaughlin and Benson have slightly higher favorability ratings among likely voters.

When asked whom they would vote for in an election between Benson and Burling, 49 percent of likely November voters said they would vote for Benson, 25 percent plan to vote for Burling, 3 percent prefer some other candidate, 2 percent say they will skip the election, and 21 percent are undecided.

In a race between Benson and McLaughlin, 49 percent of likely voters say they plan to vote for Benson, 28 percent plan to vote for McLaughlin, 1 percent prefer some other candidate, 2 percent will skip the election, and 20 percent are undecided.

Right Direction or Wrong Track?

In more good news for the Benson reelection campaign, New Hampshire adults are increasingly optimistic about New Hampshire's future. Sixty-five percent think things in New Hampshire are generally going in the right direction, 26 percent think things are seriously off on the wrong track, and 9 percent say they don't know. The percentage of adults thinking that New Hampshire is headed in the right direction has increased from 61 percent in February.

Most Important Problem Facing New Hampshire

For the past several years, the problem of how to fund primary and secondary education in New Hampshire has been the issue New Hampshire adults said was the most important problem facing the state. In recent months, concerns about jobs and the economy have also been seen as an equally important problem. While the state's economy has improved and unemployment has fallen, concern over the economy is in the forefront of the minds of many Granite Staters.

In the most recent Granite State Poll, the most important problems identified by New Hampshire adults are jobs and the economy (20%), education funding (20%), taxes (13%), quality of education (7%), health care issues (5%), and problems with the state budget (4%).

Subgroup Analysis

Benson's highest approval and favorability ratings come from Republicans and conservatives. Democrats, liberals, union households and people with post-graduate degrees give Benson his lowest approval and favorability ratings.

When looking at all demographic breakdowns concerning the most important problem, New Hampshire adults who live in Northern New Hampshire most worried about jobs and the economy, while those making more than \$100,000 per year are most concerned about funding

education in the state.

Granite State Poll Methodology

These findings are based on the most recent Granite State Poll conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center from April 19 to April 26, 2004. A random sample of 542 New Hampshire adults was interviewed by telephone. In 95 of 100 cases, the statewide estimates will be accurate to plus or minus 4.3 percent. Results reported for other subgroups have potential for somewhat larger variation than those for the entire population.

The data have been weighted to adjust for numbers of adults and telephone lines within households, respondent sex, and region of the state. In addition to potential sampling error, all surveys have other potential sources of non-sampling error including question order effects, question wording effects, and non-response.