Chris Christie's approval rating on Sandy recovery drops, poll shows

Gov. Chris Christie

TRENTON — A new poll shows that while Gov. Chris Christie's overall job rating among New Jersey voters has stabilized, his marks on a defining issue of his governorship — the Hurricane Sandy recovery effort — have fallen.

The Rutgers-Eagleton poll, released this morning, shows that 54 percent of voters approve of how the Republican governor has handled the state's rebuilding after the 2012 storm. That's a 15-point drop from a January survey and a 26-point slide from November.

Thirty-six percent of voters disapprove of Christie's handling of the storm recovery — up 10 percentage points from January — while 10 percent are unsure.

"These new numbers are a far cry from the nearly unanimous praise the governor had received for post-Sandy leadership," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton poll and a political science professor at Rutgers University. "We're seeing a real impact from recent claims involving withheld Sandy aid as political payback, as well as accusations of uneven and inappropriate distribution of recovery funds. This could have a more significant long-term impact than the Fort Lee lane closing scandal that opened Christie's second term."

Christie's approval ratings skyrocketed in the wake of Sandy, especially his marks among Democrats.

But in recent months, his administration has been engulfed by scandal. Democrats have accused members of his office and inner circle of closing lanes at the George Washington Bridge last September in a case of political payback. Christie has denied any personal involvement.

In addition, Mayor Dawn Zimmer of Hoboken, a Democrat, has accused members of Christie's cabinet of threatening to withhold Sandy aid if she did not support a development project in the city.

And many residents have slammed Christie for slow disbursement of Sandy aid. The governor has largely blamed the delay on the federal government's red tape.

Today's poll shows that Christie's bipartisan support on Sandy is slipping. Forty-six percent of voters say they approve of the governor's handling of the recovery — down 15 percentage points from the group's January survey.

Support is also slipping among Republicans and independents. Fifty-four percent of independents approve of Christie's work on Sandy — a 17-point drop from last month. Republican support is down 13 points to 69 percent.

The survey also shows that 45 percent of voters say Christie's administration withheld Sandy aid from some mayors in retaliation for not endorsing him in his re-election bid last year. Forty-one percent say such accusations are false, while 13 percent are uncertain.

"When even Republicans show eroding support of a key Christie selling point — his management of the largest natural disaster to hit the state — things are not going well, even if overall favorability ratings look stable for now," Redlawsk said.

Christie — long considered a top contender for the Republican nomination for president in 2016 — has seen his overall poll numbers drop amid the controversies.

Still, today's poll shows his overall job marks are similar to those in January's survey. Christie's favorability rating is 49 percent — three points up from last month. His job approval is 55 percent — a two-point increase from last month.

And New Jersey voters appear willing to stand by Christie. Only one in five think the governor should resign amid the scandals. Nearly three-quarters say he should stay in office. Nearly 90 percent of Christie voters say they'd cast their ballots for him again if they had the chance.

As for 2016? Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner for the White House, leads Christie 51 to 41 percent among New Jersey voters in a hypothetical head-to-head presidential matchup. That is an improvement from January's survey, when Clinton led Christie 55 to 34 percent.

"In the end, Governor Christie still has a solid base of support among New Jersey voters, even if it is no longer at the record levels we once saw," Redlawsk said. "In retrospect, it was always unreasonable to expect his post-Sandy ratings would last forever, though we never anticipated how they would fall. Christie's future may now depend on how well he can pivot to issues that have helped him in the past, including his recent focus on public worker pensions and health care costs."

The poll was conducted over the phone with 842 New Jersey adults from Feb. 22-28. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.7 percent.

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