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Emotions fuel Christie's job approval numbers

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Gov. Chris Christie, seen at a March town hall meeting at the New Jersey Maneuverable Assets Training Equipment Site in Manchester, drew mixed results in a recent poll. / DOUG HOOD/ASBURY PARK PRESS



Column by JOHN

SCHOONEJONGEN

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The headlines about a recent Rutgers-Eagleton poll on Gov. Chris Christie's tenure went in a predictable direction.

The poll asked registered voters in New Jersey to indicate which among a list of adjectives most applied to the state's ubiquitous governor. Not surprisingly, the answers that got among the highest ratings were the negatives: arrogant, stubborn, self-centered and (let's throw one noun in there) bully. Between 71 and 86 percent of respondents said those terms fit the governor either very well or somewhat well.

In almost equal numbers, those polled said Christie was smart, a leader (there's another noun), independent and effective.

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Lost in the results were numbers that showed Christie's approval ratings hovering just below 50 percent, which is a fairly consistent number for Rutgers-Eagleton polls. Other polls have shown the governor with slightly more than 50 percent approval.

The true worth of the poll, however, is in showing our continued obsession with Christie's personality rather than his policies.

This is most obvious on the national stage where Christie has so diligently nudged himself. Pundits opposed to him usually focus on his aggressive nature. He's a bully who disrespects women; he's loud and impolite – that's the common narrative among his detractors.

Among his supporters, Christie is straight-forward, iron-willed and politically savvy.

As David Redlawsk, poll director for Rutgers-Eagleton, said, "Emotions drive a great deal of evaluation of the governor."

But a deeper dive into the poll's numbers show a more complex picture of the New Jersey electorate than simple emotional reaction.

For example, one might think that it is the poorest New Jerseyans who are most displeased with the governor.

The Rutgers poll indicates that's not quite etched in stone. Forty-seven percent of those with household incomes of less than \$50,000 held an unfavorable opinion of Christie. But 48 percent of those with incomes between \$100,000 and \$150,000 viewed him unfavorably. When factoring in the margin of error (4.3 percentage points), that difference is negligible, but it is nonetheless interesting.

Meanwhile, approval ratings peaked at 50 percent for Christie in only two groups — those with incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and those with incomes above \$150,000. If Christie is favoring the rich, as Democrats claim, apparently they either don't know it or aren't flocking to his banner in droves because of it.

The visceral reactions to Christie, of course, help fuel both the governor's positive and negative ratings.

But will those high emotions solidify either his support or opposition come 2013 when, assuming he stays in New Jersey, he must decide whether to run for a second term? Or will economic issues that affect incomes ranging from little to a lot have a greater impact?

What Christie and his team believe are the answers to those questions eventually will determine what's next for both Christie and the constituents he serves.

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