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## Eagleton: Christie's positive traits rating soars

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Polls released over the last week show Gov. Chris Christie with one of the highest approval ratings ever recorded for a New Jersey governor. Analysis from the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll says the reason is voters are much more likely to see him as a smart, effective leader than they were before Superstorm Sandy.

Christie's leadership and bipartisan embrace of President Obama after Sandy earned strong approval from residents, leading nearly two-thirds to say "smart" and "strong leader" are the two traits that best describe the governor. More than half also call him "effective" and "independent." These positive traits are up sharply from a March 2012 Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, the last time they were asked.

In contrast, negative traits are now much less likely to be applied to Christie. Only 32 percent now say "bully" describes the governor "very well," down nine points, while 40 percent now say it does not describe him at all, an improvement of 13 points. While voters are still more likely to apply the traits "stubborn" and "arrogant" to the governor, their use has also declined: stubborn by eight points to 54 percent and arrogant by 13 points to 43 percent.

More than half of poll respondents say Christie makes them proud, a gain of 16 points since March. Almost half – 47 percent – say they are enthusiastic about him, up 11 points. Concurrently, negative feelings are down sharply: 33 percent say the governor makes them worried (down 17 points) and only 29 percent say he makes them angry (down 13 points).

"We saw Governor Christie's ratings spike post-Sandy and these results tell us why," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers University.

"People liked the way Christie led during the storm and that performance has rubbed off on all aspects of how voters see the governor. Leadership is paramount, but so is the drop in the use of negative labels. Many seem to see the governor in a new light."

Among the 67 percent of voters who now have a favorable impression of Christie, 23 percent say they are positive because of his honesty, integrity or frankness. Another 18 percent specifically cite Christie's leadership during Sandy as the reason for their favorability toward him. Other top reasons for favorable impressions include Christie's governing style and policy decisions (11 percent) and his results in getting things done and improving New Jersey (11 percent).

One-third of voters continue to have an unfavorable impression of Christie, with the leading reasons given as his dealings with education reform and teachers (24 percent), followed by their belief that Christie has a confrontational or bully-like persona (17 percent). Another 10 percent say Christie's overall character and personality turns them off.

Results are from a poll of 1,228 New Jersey adults conducted statewide among both landline and cell phone households from Nov 14-17. Within this sample is a subsample of 1,108 registered voters; this subsample has a margin of error of +/- 2.9 percentage points.

### Christie gets highest-ever marks for positive traits

Since the poll started asking about his personality traits in August 2010, Christie has received his most positive reviews in the still-evolving short, post-Sandy era, surpassing his previous personal bests of April 2011, when more than half said "smart," "strong leader," and "independent" applied very well.

Reflecting nearly unanimous praise for his handling of Sandy, leadership is now the predominant trait applied to Christie, with 65 percent saying it applies very well, 15-point bump since last March. Sixty-three percent of respondents now call the governor smart, a 13-point improvement. He also gets higher marks for other traits including effective (53 percent, up 20 points), independent (55 percent, up five points), trustworthy (45 percent, up 14 points), fair (42 percent, up 16 points) and reformer (36 percent, up five points).

“The dramatically increased recognition of positive traits is a complete turnaround from March, when the top traits were stubborn and arrogant,” said Redlawsk. “While 54 percent still say the governor is stubborn, it’s now less likely to be applied than many positive traits, and is down eight points overall. Arrogance has dropped even further, down 13 points to 43 percent. The genesis of Christie’s improved ratings is the change in the positive versus negative traits people apply to him.”

Other negative traits – bully, self-centered, and impulsive – are all much less likely to be applied than they were in March, down between seven and 13 points.

### **Improved assessments close gender gap, partisan differences**

Women have consistently been less supportive of Christie than have men both in terms of favorability and job performance. Similar results were previously visible in positive trait assessments, where women were less likely to assign positive traits to the governor. This gender gap now has disappeared. More than 60 percent of male and female voters think Christie is a strong leader and smart, and more than half think he is effective. Women now are less likely to call him stubborn, self-centered and impulsive.

“Women voters are more likely to be Democrats and have typically been far less enamored of Christie,” said Redlawsk. “But the governor’s Sandy leadership seems to have had a disproportionate effect on women, perhaps because he came across as empathetic and caring, traits not often seen in his public persona.”

Prior to Sandy, there were no positive traits that a majority of Democrats said applied very well to Christie. But a majority did think most negative traits fit him very well. Now, a majority of Democrats (52 percent) says “strong leader” applies very well, and 51 percent say the same about “smart.” Democrats still think Christie is stubborn (63 percent) and arrogant (56 percent), but both are down sharply, by 13 and 17 points respectively.

### **More pride, less anger toward Christie**

Since Sandy, more voters say they are proud of Christie and are less likely to become angry when thinking or reading about him. In March, 35 percent of voters felt proud when they thought about Christie, and 36 percent were enthusiastic. But 42 percent said they were angry and 46 percent worried.

Today the numbers have reversed, with 51 percent expressing pride and 47 percent enthusiasm, while only 29 percent are angry and 33 percent are worried. “At its core, politics has an emotional component,” noted Redlawsk. “When negative emotions are at the forefront, political leaders are at real risk of being rejected. But when emotions run as positive as they are today, they create a framework of support that lifts all other ratings.”

While only a third of Democrats say they feel proud when they hear or read about the governor, this number has doubled since March. Independent voters’ pride has increased by 21 points to 52 percent, while 82 percent of Republicans say they feel the same, up six points. Women are now more likely than men to say they are proud of the governor – 53 percent compared to 49 percent. This is a double-digit increase for both men and women and a reversal in the direction of the gender gap.

Fewer than half of Democrats now say Christie makes them angry (43 percent), an almost 20-point drop since March. Independents display a 14-point decline in their feelings of anger to 23 percent, while about 10 percent of Republicans say the same, virtually no change since March.

### **Christie’s leadership and straightforwardness**

After describing their impressions of Christie, voters were asked to explain their feelings.

Among the 67 percent of all voters who are favorable toward Christie, his leadership through Superstorm Sandy and his honest and frank style of communication get the largest number of mentions. In particular, those who feel favorable toward Christie cite how he “speaks his mind,” is “a man of his word,” “says it like it is” and “does what he says.”

Democrats who feel favorable toward the governor are most likely to mention his take-charge approach with Sandy (29 percent). Twenty percent of independents also talk about Christie’s leadership specifically in terms of Sandy, but only 5 percent of favorable Republicans mention the storm as their primary reason for liking him. Both independents and Republicans are more likely to mention Christie’s straightforwardness and candidness – 26 percent and 28 percent, respectively. Fifteen percent of favorable Democrats mention these qualities.

In contrast, for the one-third of all voters with an unfavorable impression of the governor, references to Christie’s stance on education and teachers, and their perception of him as confrontational or a bully take the top spots. About a quarter of displeased Democrats and independents bring up education as the reason for their dislike. Sixteen percent of Democrats and 18 percent of independents also said something about the governor being mean or bully-like.

“Taken together, the results of our questions on traits, emotions and reasons for impression of the governor suggest that Superstorm Sandy allowed Christie to present a side that changed many impressions of him at very core levels,” said Redlawsk. “Obviously, things can change again and likely will somewhat, but even many voters who were unremittingly negative about Christie before the storm have warm feelings and ascribe positive traits to him because of their experience with how he led the state during the crisis.”