



Budget Battle: Day 19

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## Opinions polls show sharp divisions on Walker

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By [Craig Gilbert](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Gov. Scott Walker's bitter standoff with Democrats and labor unions in Wisconsin has turned the newly elected Republican into a deeply polarizing figure, eroded his standing and left him struggling to win the battle for public opinion, a flurry of recent polls suggests.

In one new survey, 54% of Wisconsinites disapprove of Walker's performance while 43% approve. Walker is viewed less favorably than either of his main antagonists in the state's stormy budget debate: public employee unions and Democrats in the Legislature. And after just two months in office, he inspires more intense feelings - pro and con - than President Barack Obama does in Wisconsin.

Those findings come from a statewide poll of 603 adults taken Feb. 27 through Tuesday for a conservative think tank that has surveyed regularly in the state, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

"He's not winning the message battle at this point," said University of Wisconsin political scientist Ken Goldstein, who conducted the poll.

Whether Walker feels public pressure to seek a compromise with Democrats remains to be seen. He is fond of saying polls don't concern him.

The WPRI survey shows fierce division over the governor's budget-repair bill - 46% support it and 51% oppose it - but also public hunger for a resolution.

When asked whether Walker should "stand strong for the plan he has proposed no matter how long the

protests go on" or "negotiate with Democrats and public employees' unions in order to find a compromise solution," a large majority - 65% - said the governor should negotiate to find a compromise, while 33% said "stand strong."

The survey is consistent in many ways with an assortment of recent state and national polls of different sizes, methodologies and sponsors, some independent, some with conservative backing, some with union backing.

By and large, these polls show broad support for concessions by public workers on wages, pensions and benefits, but more opposition than support for efforts to weaken public-sector unions and take away collective bargaining rights.

### **Polls all agree**

The Wisconsin polls also underscore the political challenges Walker faces at the very outset of his term, just as another debate gets under way over the spending cuts in his two-year budget.

In an automated survey of 800 Wisconsin voters taken Wednesday by Rasmussen, 43% approved of the job Walker is doing and 57% disapproved.

In an automated survey of 768 Wisconsin voters taken Feb. 24-27 by Public Policy Polling, 46% approved of Walker's performance and 52% disapproved.

Rasmussen's poll is a frequent target of criticism from Democrats who say it's biased toward Republicans. Public Policy Polling is a firm that traditionally polls for Democrats. The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute is a right-of-center policy shop. But the three surveys - and a fourth sponsored by the AFL-CIO last month - tell similar stories about Walker's popularity.

The WPRI poll may offer the best measure of Walker's slippage politically, since Goldstein did a comparable survey for the group not long after the November election.

In the WPRI survey from mid-November, 45% of Wisconsinites viewed Walker favorably and 35% viewed him unfavorably.

Today, about the same share - 43% - view him favorably, but the share of people who view him unfavorably has jumped 18 points to 53%.

The poll also illustrates how feelings about Walker have intensified among both supporters and opponents. Even though Walker's overall favorability has gone down slightly from 45% to 43%, the percentage of people who strongly support him - who view him "very favorably" - has gone up from 21% to 28%. The percentage of people who strongly oppose him - who view him "very unfavorably" - has more than doubled from 19% to 41%.

In other words, opinion has sharply polarized around Walker within two months of his taking office, with staunch opponents now outnumbering staunch supporters.

"This is stunning polarization like we used to see with George W. Bush in 2004," said Goldstein, who has done numerous polls in Wisconsin, including the Big Ten Battleground polls in 2008 for a consortium of Big Ten universities.

In fact, opinion in Wisconsin about Walker's job performance is significantly more polarized than opinion about Obama's performance, according to the poll. More people "strongly approve" of Walker's performance (29%) than "strongly approve" of Obama's performance (21%); and more people "strongly disapprove" of Walker's performance (45%) than "strongly disapprove" of Obama's performance (26%). Overall, Obama's numbers haven't changed much since last fall's WPRI poll. But they are now substantially better than Walker's: 53% approve and 42% disapprove of the job Obama's doing.

### **Independents disapprove**

All the recent polling shows a massive gap between how Republicans and Democrats in Wisconsin feel about both the governor and his budget proposals. In the WPRI poll, 68% of Republicans think things in Wisconsin are going in the right direction, while 96% of Democrats say they're on "the wrong track."

There are even bigger partisan splits on Walker's performance as governor (he has 90% approval among Republicans and 91% disapproval among Democrats).

But the WPRI survey suggests that Walker's standing among self-identified independents has slipped substantially since his election. According to exit polls, Walker won 56% of the "independent" vote last fall.

But in the new poll, 62% of independents think the state is on the wrong track, 57% disapprove of Walker's job performance, and 59% have an unfavorable view of him.

Compared with last November, said Goldstein, "those people who liked him, like him even more; those people who disliked him, dislike him even more; (and) independents and people who didn't know enough about him are trending negative."

Despite Walker's troubles, the WPRI poll suggests there remains public support for reining in government spending, at least as a general proposition: 50% called the state budget situation a "big problem" and another 36% called it "somewhat of a problem." Offered the choice of higher taxes with more services or lower taxes with fewer services, 52% chose the second option and 42% chose the first.

Among the issues at stake in the budget fight, the WPRI poll found broad support (81%) for "requiring public employees to contribute to their own pensions." It found Wisconsinites split down the middle on Walker's proposal to end automatic dues check-offs for public employee unions. It found 52% opposed to the governor's decision to exempt police and firefighters from the provisions weakening collective bargaining.

The survey also sought to measure how people respond to different characterizations of Walker's proposals on collective bargaining, which the governor says is about cutting costs and opponents say is about union-busting.

Half the people in the survey were asked how they felt about "stripping most public employees of their right to collectively bargain over benefits and working conditions as part of a ploy to eliminate public employee unions altogether." With the issue framed that way, 58% opposed it and 32% supported it.

Others were asked how they felt about "limiting most public employees' ability to negotiate over non-wage issues in order to prevent local union affiliates from obstructing the budgeting process for local governments." Framed that way, there was greater support (47%) for the plan, but a higher number still opposed the idea (50%).

Just over half of those surveyed (51%) disapproved of the decision by state Senate Democrats to leave Wisconsin to stall the Walker plan. At the same time, more people rated Democrats in the Legislature favorably (50%) than Republicans in the legislature (46%) and Walker (43%).

And public employee unions came out better than the politicians: 59% of Wisconsinites rated public employee unions favorably and 59% rated teachers unions favorably.

Wisconsinites were also asked in the poll about their support for different approaches to dealing with the state's budget gap: 72% favored raising the income tax on people making over \$150,000; 50% favored raising the state sales tax by 1 percentage point; 31% favored reducing state aid to local governments and school districts; 30% favored laying off state workers; and 21% favored eliminating government health care benefits for low-income single adults with incomes over \$14,300 per year.

The WPRI poll was done using live interviewers, and one-quarter of the interviews were with cell-phone users, Goldstein said. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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