

The Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll

NEW JERSEYANS' CONTRARY VIEWS OF POLITICIANS:

RE-ELECT THE SCOUNDRELS

RELEASE: SL/EP 70-7 (EP120-7)

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A story based on the survey findings presented in this release and background memo will appear in the Sunday, October 19th Star-Ledger. We ask users to properly attribute this copyrighted information to "*The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll.*"

Want a public opinion puzzle? OK. Explain this one: Most New Jerseyans have unfavorable views of politicians, think they go into and stay in politics for reasons of personal gain, and believe almost half of them to be corrupt. Yet the same people also say they are far more likely to vote for an experienced politician or an incumbent than an outsider. Go figure.

The image New Jerseyans have of politicians is a decidedly unflattering one. More than half--58 percent--say their general impression is unfavorable, with 23 percent saying "very" unfavorable. In contrast, just 37 percent say they hold favorable impressions of politicians. And 80 percent of New Jerseyans say politicians in the Garden State are no different from politicians elsewhere.

New Jerseyans are highly distrustful of politicians' motives. By a margin of about three-to-one, far more think that people go into politics for personal gain rather than to serve the public. By an even greater margin of four-to-one people believe that once in office politicians look out more for their own interests than for the public interest. Just 14 percent believe that politicians pay "a good deal" of attention to the people who elected them when deciding what should be done in the policy arena.

And New Jerseyans think there is a fair amount of corruption in politics. When asked how many out of 10 politicians they would guess to be corrupt, the statewide average was close to half (4.9 out of 10). However, the survey also pointed out that the vast majority--63 percent--think that politicians are no different than people in other occupations, and that there is no difference between politicians in New Jersey and those in other states (84 percent).

Despite these negative views, experience in politics is still widely valued. Survey respondents were read a list of eight characteristics that a candidate for office might have

and asked if they thought each would make them more or less likely to vote for the person, or if there would be no difference. At the top of the list was having "experience in business"--56 percent said they would be more likely to vote for such a candidate, only 2 percent less likely and the remainder said it would make no difference or expressed no opinion.

Close behind business experience was having "experience in politics"--51 percent they would be more likely to vote for such a candidate while only 7 percent said they would be less likely to do so. In stark contrast, just 12 percent said they would be more likely to vote for "an outsider with no experience in politics, while 44 percent said they would be less likely to vote for such a person. A greater percentage of people also said they would be less likely (20 percent) than more likely (6 percent) to vote for someone who was wealthy, although most (72 percent) said it would make no difference in their vote.

Over 80 percent said it would make no difference to them if the candidate running was either a woman or a minority. Opinion was split over lawyers--21 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a lawyer running for office while 22 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate with this background. The remainder said it would make no difference.

Cliff Zukin, director of the Rutgers-based poll commented, "In some ways the findings that people hold politicians in low regard but value experience are not necessarily contradictory. The general negative impressions that citizens have of politicians are based on what people read and see in the news media, which usually report misdeeds, scandals and 'what is wrong' such as the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. But when people look at their local representatives they generally find them to be attentive, hard-working and well motivated, as indicated by the strong re-election record of incumbents."

Zukin also noted that Eagleton asked some of these same questions in 1981 and that impressions of politicians appear to have changed little over the past decade and a half.

The latest *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton Poll was conducted with a random sample of 400 New Jersey residents interviewed by telephone between September 14 and 20. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points.

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BACKGROUND MEMO — RELEASE SL/EP70-7 (EP120-7), MONDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1998

The latest *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton Poll was conducted between September 14 and 20, 1998, when a scientifically selected random sample of 403 New Jersey adult residents was interviewed by telephone. All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for

the total sample size of 403 is just over ± 5 percent, at a 95 percent confidence interval. Thus if 50 percent of New Jerseyans were found to have a favorable opinion of the Governor, one would be 95 percent sure that the true figure would be between 45 and 55 percent (50 ± 5) had all New Jerseyans been interviewed, rather than just a sample. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such separate figures reported for men and women, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. Click here for a [chart](#) that shows the relationship between sample size and sampling error. Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording, or context effects. The verbatim wording of all questions asked are reproduced in this background memo. The sample has been stratified based on county and the data have been weighted on age and education to insure an accurate proportional representation of the state. Two versions of the questionnaire were used in this study. Not all questions were on both versions.

"Now on another topic, would you say that your general impression of politicians is favorable or unfavorable? IF CHOICE MADE, PROBE: Would you say VERY favorable/unfavorable, or SOMEWHAT? [IP1]

	Very Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Somewhat Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	No opinion/ Don't Know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	7%	30%	35%	23%	5%	100%	(403)
<u>PAST SURVEYS</u>							
February, 1981	6%	28%	41%	20%	5%	100%	(1002)

"Do you think that politicians here in New Jersey are better or worse than those in other states, worse than others, or about the same?" [IP2]

	Better	Worse	About the same	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	7%	9%	79%	5%	100%	(403)

Similar Question asked in February, 1981 Star-Ledger/Eagleton poll

"Is your general impression of politicians here in New Jersey favorable or unfavorable? (PROBE: Very or somewhat?)"

	Very Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Somewhat Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	Don't Know	Total	(n)
<u>PAST SURVEYS</u>							
February, 1981	7%	45%	28%	11%	9%	100%	(1003)

"Do you think most people decide to GO INTO politics for public service reasons, or for personal gain?" [IP3]

	Public Service	Personal Gain	Both (VOL)	Don't Know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	21%	65%	10%	5%	101%	(403)

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981	20%	64%	14%	3%	101%	(1003)
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"Once in office, do you think politicians look out more for the interests of the public, or more for their own interests?" [IP4]

	Public interest	Own interest	Both/Depends (VOL)	Don't Know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	17%	69%	12%	3%	101%	(403)

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981	19%	62%	14%	5%	100%	(1003)
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"Do you feel that almost all politicians are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do quite few of them NOT know what they are doing?" [IP5]

	Know what they are doing	Don't know what they are doing	Some do/some don't/ Depends (VOL)	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	44%	47%	4%	5%	100%	(403)

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981	39%	50%	10%	2%	101%	(1003)
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"When deciding what should be done, how much attention do you think most politicians pay to the people who elected them – a good deal, some, or not very much?" [IP6]

	Good deal	Some	Not very much	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	14%	58%	27%	2%	101%	(403)

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981	15%	50%	33%	2%	100%	(1003)
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"Corrupt politicians get more press attention than others, so it's hard to tell how many are really corrupt. Out of 10 politicians, how many would you guess to be corrupt?" [IP7]

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK	Refused	Total
September, 1998	--	6%	13%	12%	8%	21%	9%	8%	5%	6%	5%	5%	2%	100%

MEAN 4.87

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981 1% 9% 10% 15% 10% 21% 7% 7% 6% 4% 2% 7% -- 99%

MEAN 4.5

"Do you think politicians are more corrupt than people in other occupations, less corrupt, or is there really no difference?" [IP8]

	More	Less	No difference	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	31%	4%	63%	3%	101%	(403)

PAST SURVEYS

February, 1981 22% 4% 71% 3% 100% (1000)

"Do you think that politicians in New Jersey are more corrupt than those in other states, less corrupt, or is there no difference?" [IP9]

	More corrupt	Less corrupt	No difference	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998	4%	8%	84%	4%	100%	(403)

"I'm going to read you a list of traits that different candidates for office have. Please just tell me if you think each would make you MORE likely to vote for the person, LESS likely, or make no difference. First (READ FIRST, ROTATE) More likely, less or no difference." [IP10]

- A. Experience in a business
- B. A background as a lawyer
- C. Being wealthy
- D. Being an outsider with no experience in politics
- E. Being a woman
- F. Having experience in politics
- G. Being the incumbent in office running for re-election
- H. Being a minority

	More likely	Less likely	No difference	Don't know	Total	(n)
September, 1998						
A)	56%	2%	41%	2%	101%	(403)
B)	21%	22%	55%	2%	100%	(403)
C)	6%	20%	72%	2%	100%	(403)

D)	12%	44%	42%	2%	100%	(403)
E)	10%	3%	87%	1%	101%	(403)
F)	51%	7%	40%	2%	100%	(403)
G)	19%	8%	67%	7%	101%	(403)
H)	11%	7%	81%	1%	100%	(403)