

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Free Thinking Minnesota: Approval of Governor and Opposition to New Sales Tax but Support for Democrats in State Legislative Races and Doubts About Lt. Governor

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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Despite lingering perceptions of Minnesota as a “lock” for the Democratic Party and supportive of “big government,” the political attitudes of Minnesotan voters are not so clear cut.

According to a Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute poll, voters do have conservative views on some issues:

- Fifty-five percent approve of Governor Tim Pawlenty’s job performance.
- Nearly three quarters oppose a state constitutional amendment to raise sales taxes to pay for outdoors and arts projects in Minnesota.

But Minnesotans also favor Democrats and question some key Republican state leaders:

- Democratic candidates for the Minnesota State Legislature are favored over Republican candidates by 13 points (49% to 36%)
- Large numbers of Minnesotans are not very confident that Lieutenant Governor Carol Molnau would be an effective governor if Pawlenty were elected Vice President.

The survey was conducted of 763 likely voters between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008; the margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points.

Good News in Bad Times for Governor Pawlenty

Governor Pawlenty enjoys favorable approval ratings. Fifty-five percent approve of his job performance compared to 39% who disapprove. Pawlenty receives even stronger marks from independents who do not identify with either major political party (59% approval rating). The Governor receives his greatest support, of course, from fellow Republicans (87%) but even a third of Democrats approve of his job performance (30%).

Approval of Governor Pawlenty's Performance

	Approve	Disapprove	DK / Refused
All Likely Voters	55%	39%	6%
Republicans	87%	9%	5%
Independents	59%	37%	4%
Democrats	30%	63%	7%

Pawlenty's positive approval ratings are particularly impressive because it shows that he is escaping the backlash that has sapped support for presumptive Republican president John McCain's campaign and Senator Norm Coleman's quest for re-election. He is receiving favorable ratings from 47% of Minnesotans who think the country is off on the wrong track and 38% of those who disapprove of President George Bush's performance.

The Pawlenty Exception: Escaping Anti-Republican Tide

	Approve	Disapprove	DK / Refused
Country Headed in Right Direction (18%)	86%	10%	4%
Country off on Wrong Track (77%)	47%	46%	7%
Approve of Bush (32%)	91%	6%	3%
Disapprove of Bush (66%)	38%	55%	7%

Pawlenty is also escaping blame for the economy and other challenges facing Minnesota. The economy and jobs is the state's most important problem. Among the third who placed it at the top of their agenda, 55% approve of the Governor's job performance. Among the 13% who identified taxes as the state's top challenge, Pawlenty enjoys an 80% approval rating. Among the smaller segments of Minnesotans who rate education and transportation as important problems, the Governor receives negative ratings (54% and 68% disapproved, respectively).

Pawlenty Escapes Blame while Getting Credit

	All Likely Voters	Approve	Disapprove	DK / Refused
Most Important Problems in Minnesota				
The economy and jobs	33%	55%	40%	5%
Taxes	13%	80%	17%	3%
Education	11%	39%	54%	7%
Health Care	9%	55%	42%	3%
Housing and Home Mortgages	9%	63%	35%	2%
Gas Prices	8%	49%	36%	15%
Transportation	5%	32%	68%	0%
Immigration	4%	71%	19%	10%
Global Warming	2%	42%	58%	0%

Large Opposition to Constitutional Amendment to Fund Arts and Outdoors

The support for Minnesota’s Republican Governor coincides with overwhelming opposition to a state constitutional amendment that will be placed on the ballot in November, which would raise the sales tax to pay for outdoors and arts projects in Minnesota. Seventy-two percent of voters oppose the amendment because they believe that the services should be paid for from existing revenues or by individuals. By contrast, only 22% support it as necessary to protect Minnesota's quality of life.

The opposition to the constitutional amendment is quite broad. Although Republicans and independents are most intensely opposed, 59% of Democrats also plan to vote against the amendment. There does not appear to be a sizeable core political constituency in favor of the initiative.

Broad Opposition to Raising Sales Taxes for Arts and Outdoors

	Necessary to protect Minnesota's quality of life	Services should be paid from existing revenues or by individuals	DK / Refused
All Likely Voters	22%	72%	6%
Republicans	10%	86%	4%
Independents	15%	83%	1%
Democrats	32%	59%	8%

Democratic Edge in State Legislative Races

Even as Minnesotans are sympathetic to their Republican Governor and are opposed to certain sales tax increases, they give Democrats an edge in the elections for the state legislature. Half of likely Minnesota voters report that they would vote for a Democratic Party candidate rather than the Republican if elections were held today; 36% indicate they would support the GOP candidate. This form of “generic” question is widely used nationally to track the broad landscape for congressional races because it provides a general gauge of how the political winds will impact less visible election contests.

Although Governor Pawlenty has used his personal approach to evade the backlash against Republicans, GOP legislators appear to be taking a hit. Among the two thirds of voters who disapprove of President Bush’s job performance, 69% plan to vote for a Democratic candidate in the state legislative contests. Among the three quarters of voters who report that the country is heading off on the wrong track, 59% support Democrats. With both major political parties unifying behind their candidates, independents are breaking for Democratic candidates by an 11 point margin (31% to 20%).

Democratic Legislators Benefiting from GOP Backlash

	Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	Support Republican Legislative Candidate	Other	DK / Refused
All likely voters	49%	36%	3%	13%
Country Headed in Right Direction (18%)	13%	77%	2%	8%
Country off on Wrong Track (77%)	59%	25%	3%	13%
Approve of Bush (32%)	7%	80%	3%	11%
Disapprove of Bush (66%)	69%	14%	3%	13%
Republicans (40%)	5%	82%	3%	10%
Independents (10%)	31%	20%	11%	38%
Democrats (51%)	87%	3%	1%	9%

Although advertising and other techniques can help high-profile candidates for president and U.S. Senate to define themselves and, at times, offset the broader political environment, this is much more difficult for candidates in the less visible and well-covered races for state legislature and other government offices. Enthusiasm and the ability to mobilize support for these down ballot races is critical and the Democrats have a major advantage with 44 % of extremely or very enthusiastic voters favoring the Democrat.

Enthusiasm Boosting Democratic Legislative Candidates

	Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	Support Republican Legislative Candidate	DK / Refused
Enthusiastic (44%)	60%	30%	7%
Somewhat enthusiastic (33%)	43%	40%	15%
Not too enthusiastic (15%)	34%	41%	21%
Not enthusiastic at all (8%)	36%	41%	18%

On the problems that Minnesotans rate as most important to the state, voters are supporting Democratic legislative candidates. Among the third that rate the economy as the most important problem, voters support the Democratic candidate by a 25 point margin (54% to 29%).

Democrats have an advantage on many other issues with the notable exception of taxes: Among the 13% who rate this as the top problem, the Republicans have a 46 point advantage (66% to 20%).

Democrats Trusted on Most Top Problems

	Rating as Most Important Problem in Minnesota	Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	Support Republican Legislative Candidate
The economy and jobs	33%	54%	29%
Taxes	13%	20%	66%
Education	11%	66%	24%
Health Care	9%	54%	29%
Housing and Home Mortgages	9%	51%	39%
Gas Prices	8%	46%	42%
Transportation	5%	66%	23%
Immigration	4%	20%	63%
Global Warming	2%	82%	0%

Although these results provide a broad gauge of the electoral environment facing Democratic and Republican state legislators, the qualities of the candidates themselves and their campaign also matter.

Doubts about Carol Molnau as Governor

Minnesota's Lt. Governor Carol Molnau has been a controversial figure most recently in relation to the collapse of the 35W Bridge. The DFL controlled Senate refused to confirm her to run the Department of Transportation for Governor Pawlenty's second term.

There are significant and fairly widespread doubts about Molnau's effectiveness as governor if Pawlenty became Vice President. Thirty-seven percent of likely voters and 40% of independents are not very confident that she would be an effective Governor. Even a fifth of Republicans have doubts.

Minnesotans not very confident in Governor Molnau

	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not very confident	DK / Refused
All Likely Voters	8%	32%	37%	23%
Republican (40%)	13%	42%	22%	23%
Independents Lean (10%)	6%	25%	40%	30%
Democrats (51%)	4%	25%	49%	22%

About the Survey

This survey is a collaboration between Minnesota Public Radio and the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. The survey was analyzed by the Center. The research team was Lawrence R. Jacobs (director) and Joanne M. Miller (Department of Political Science). Melanie Burns was the team's research and data analyst.

The survey was fielded by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, which has extensive national and state experience conducting non-partisan surveys on politics and government policy. CSRA called a sample of telephone exchanges that was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within the State of Minnesota. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. The sample was designed to represent different regions of the state in proportion to the number of adults living in each region. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

Results are based on a model which adjusts responses according to the likelihood of a respondent voting. Likelihood to vote is based on the following factors: self-reported probability of voting in the upcoming election, voting in previous elections as reported by the respondent, enthusiasm for the 2008 election, and incorporates differential turnout levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In addition, the results have been weighted to reflect the number of adults in a household and the number of telephone lines reaching the household as well as the demographic characteristics of adults in Minnesota based on region, sex, age, education, and race. Our analysis indicates that 70% percent of Minnesotans who are 18 or over are likely to vote in November.

The distribution of party identification among Minnesotan residents in the full sample is as follows:

	August 2008
Republican	39%
Independent	10%
Democrat	50%

1,093 residents of Minnesota were interviewed by telephone between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008; the margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points. In theory, in 19 cases out of 20 the results among Minnesota residents will differ by no more than 3.6 percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by interviewing all likely voters in the state. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.

