

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Minnesota State Politics: Battles Over Constitution and State House

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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According to a Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute study of likely Minnesota voters, state politics is fiery and unpredictable. A month from Election Day, three themes emerge:

- The Constitutional Amendment to increase sales taxes to fund projects in the arts and outdoors faces an uphill battle.
- Democrats enjoy a significant advantage in the battle for state house seats.
- Senator Amy Klobuchar and Governor Tim Pawlenty enjoy strong approval ratings while Senator Coleman continues to receive far weaker ratings.

The results are based on interviews with 766 likely voters conducted between September 29th and October 5th. The margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

Uphill Battle for Constitutional Amendment

One of most heated battles in Minnesota politics is over a proposed amendment to the state's constitution to raise the sales tax to pay for outdoors and arts projects in Minnesota. Historically, only about half of constitutional amendments are enacted in Minnesota because they require a majority of everyone casting a ballot during the election, not just a majority of those voting on the amendment. Voters who make a choice for a presidential or senatorial candidate but skip the amendment are, in effect, voting against its ratification. The rule of thumb is that passage of constitutional amendments usually requires majorities of about 60 percent to win ratification.

A plurality of likely voters do favor the amendment by a 46 percent to a 36 percent margin, with 9 percent not planning to vote on the amendment and 10 undecided.

Plurality Support for Amendment

	For it	Against it	Not planning to vote on this	Undecided
Constitutional Amendment	46%	36%	9%	10%

Although these results indicate that more Minnesotans favor the amendment than oppose it, they also identify **three hurdles to building the necessary majority to ratify it**. First, the effective opposition to the amendment is 45%; the 9 percent not planning to vote for it are, in effect, negative votes. Second, there are divisions among Democrats, who might be expected to be most inclined to favor the amendment – 4 out of 10 Democrats are currently not supporting it. In addition, nearly 6 out of 10 Independents are not supportive.

Resistance among Democrats and Independents

	All Voters	For it	Against it	Not planning to vote on this	Undecided
Republican	39%	27%	53%	8%	12%
Independents	10%	43%	42%	3%	13%
Democrats	51%	60%	22%	10%	8%

Third, **the country’s economic turmoil and general challenges are deterring strong majority support for the amendment**. Among the 83 percent of Minnesotans who worry that the country is off on the wrong track, about half are **not** supporting the amendment and only 34% are supporting it. A similar pattern of resistance is evident among the 46 percent of voters who identify the economy and jobs as the state’s single most important problem. Among the 16 percent who single out taxes as the top problem, about 8 out of 10 voters are not supporting the amendment. (Discussion of question wording is provided below.)

Bad Times Sapping Support for Amendment

	All Voters	For it	Against it	Not planning to vote on this	Undecided
Country is Heading:					
In the Right Direction	12%	37%	48%	4%	11%

Off on Wrong Track	83%	48%	34%	9%	9%
Minnesota's Most Important Problem:					
Economy and jobs	46%	45%	34%	8%	13%
Taxes	16%	15%	74%	7%	4%

Potential Opportunity for Democrats in Minnesota House Races

With all seats in the Minnesota House of Representatives up for election, Democrats are seeking to hold the majority they current enjoy (85 seats to the Republicans’ 49) and, in addition, to pick up 5 net seats to be able to override the Governor’s veto. (The Minnesota Senate, which is not up for election in 2008, already has a majority large enough to override the gubernatorial vetoes.)

Democrats maintain a double-digit lead in the elections for the state legislature. Closely paralleling the results from an August survey, 45 percent of likely Minnesota voters report that they would vote for a Democratic Party candidate compared to 34 percent who favor the Republican if elections were held today. 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 it is not possible to predict the outcome of individual races or estimate how many seats Democrats may win, this is a substantial Democratic advantage given the number of very close Minnesota elections in 2006. (A mere seven thousand votes determined the outcome of 17 close races won by Democrats in 2006.)

Edge for Democratic Candidates for Minnesota Legislature

	Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	Support Republican Legislative Candidate	Other	Undecided
All Likely Voters:				
Aug 7- 17	49%	36%	3%	13%
Sept 27 - Oct 5	45%	34%	2%	19%

Democrats are benefiting from the malaise in the country and the particular excitement of its supporters. Among the 83 percent who see the country as heading off on the wrong track, half favor House Democrats and only 27% support Republicans. In addition, voters favor Democrats over Republicans by often sizeable double digit margins on 4 of the 5 single most important problems facing Minnesota (led by the economy and jobs).

	All Voters	Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	Support Republican Legislative Candidate	Undecided
Country is Heading:				
In the Right Direction	12%	14%	69%	16%
Off on Wrong Track	83%	51%	27%	20%

Minnesota's Most Important Problem:				
Economy and jobs	46%	47%	30%	21%
Taxes	16%	14%	66%	20%
Education	15%	62%	22%	14%
Health Care	14%	60%	20%	19%
Transportation	5%	50%	33%	18%

Democrats may also benefit from higher turnout. Voters supporting Democratic legislative candidates are more enthusiastic than those favoring Republican candidates. While 69 percent of voters backing Democrats are extremely or very enthusiastic, 59 percent of Republicans share the same passion for the election. This discrepancy may be a leading indicator that turnout for Democratic candidates may be higher, which (like in 2006) could impact closely contested races.

Supporters of Democratic Candidates are More Enthusiastic

	Extremely or Very enthusiastic	Somewhat enthusiastic	Not too or Not at all enthusiastic
Support Democratic Legislative Candidate	69%	23%	8%
Support Republican Legislative Candidate	59%	26%	14%

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. The competitiveness of each race will also vary depending on a number of conditions including the partisan composition of the legislative district.

Democratic Advantage in Congressional Races

The Democratic advantage in the Minnesota legislative races is even wider for U.S. House races. Democrats hold a 15 point gap over their Republican rivals in the generic congressional ballot horse race item. Much like the case with the state legislative races, congressional Democrats are benefiting from a backlash against the country's direction, concern about the country's most important problems, and stronger enthusiasm.

Edge for Democratic Candidates for U.S. House Seats

	Support Democratic Candidate for US House	Support Republican Candidate for US House	Other	Undecided
All Likely Voters	48%	33%	2%	18%

Strong Approval for Klobuchar and Pawlenty but not for Coleman

Senator Amy Klobuchar is Minnesota’s most popular state official in our study. Two thirds of Minnesotans approve of Klobuchar’s job performance; this is a 3 point increase in a period marked by sustained financial crises. Her remarkably strong approval ratings cross party lines, with half of Republicans and two thirds of independents giving favorable evaluations.

Strong Approval of Senator Klobuchar

	Approve	Disapprove	Undecided
All Likely Voters:			
Aug 7- 17	64%	19%	17%
Sept 27 - Oct 5	67%	20%	14%
Partisan Evaluations:			
Republicans	48%	38%	15%
Independents	66%	16%	18%
Democrats	81%	7%	12%

Governor Pawlenty's approval scores are nearly as high at 61 percent. The Governor's visibility as a finalist for Senator John McCain's running mate appears to have boosted his standing among Minnesotans; his approval ratings improved by 6 points since August. Six out of 10 independents and 4 out of 10 Democrats give the Governor favorable evaluations. Pawlenty even draws support from two sets of voters who have been hostile to Republicans in 2008 – those who see the country heading off on the wrong track and Minnesotans worried about state problems in major domestic policy areas (namely, the economy, education, health care, and, perhaps surprisingly, transportation).

Higher Approval of Governor Pawlenty's Performance

	All Voters	Approve	Disapprove
All Likely Voters:			
Aug 7- 17		55%	39%
Sept 27 - Oct 5		61%	34%
Partisan Evaluations:			
Republicans	39%	90%	7%
Independents	10%	64%	28%
Democrats	51%	39%	57%
Country is Heading:			
In the Right Direction	12%	85%	14%
Off on Wrong Track	83%	57%	39%
Minnesota's Most Important Problem:			
The economy and jobs	46%	56%	40%
Taxes	16%	85%	7%
Education	15%	57%	41%

Health Care	14%	61%	37%
Transportation	5%	55%	43%

In comparison to Senator Klobuchar and Governor Pawlenty, Senator Coleman has low approval ratings. A large majority of Democrats and a plurality of independents disapprove of his job performance. These ratings are, no doubt, depressed a bit by a challenging re-election campaign; but the Senator's approval scores have consistently fallen below the symbolically important 50 percent threshold for more than a year.

Disapproval of Senator Coleman

	Approve	Disapprove	Undecided
All Likely Voters:			
Aug 7- 17	46%	42%	12%
Sept 27 - Oct 5	45%	49%	7%
Partisan Evaluations:			
Republicans	81%	15%	4%
Independents	41%	49%	10%
Democrats	18%	74%	8%

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 samples were 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.

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.

Wording of Constitutional Amendment Question

We designed a question about the constitutional amendment to capture its content while avoiding the long and convoluted wording approved by the legislature. The following question was used:

“A state constitutional amendment will be placed on the ballot in November to raise the Minnesota sales tax by three-eighths of one percent until the year 2034 to pay for clean water, wildlife habit, parks and trails, and arts projects. Do you plan to vote for this amendment or against it, or are you not planning to register a vote on this issue?”

Extensive and independent research on survey instrument design and its effects on respondents document the downsides of asking long and convoluted questions; respondents often indicate approval because they are confused and are unwilling to invest the time in better understanding the question. The premier journal, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, regularly publishes research on these and other related topics by scholars and practitioners.