

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Obama Faces Competitive Race with Pawlenty and Romney, Turbulent Legislative Races and Policy Debates

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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According to the latest Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll, President Barack Obama leads Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney in a potential 2012 presidential matchup. But Obama is unable to clear 50%, managing a relatively modest 9 point lead over Pawlenty (49% versus 40%) and 7 points over Romney (47% versus 40%). The President's lead over Pawlenty is outside the conventional range of sampling error of ± 3.6 but within the more cautious sampling error of ± 5.1 ; his lead over Romney is within sampling error as defined by both measures.

Obama leads by 20 points or more over popular conservatives former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and Minnesota Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann.

Other findings:

- In legislative races, 50% would prefer an alternative to incumbent members of Congress while the Democratic candidates for the Minnesota Legislature enjoy an 11 point advantage against their Republican opponents.
- A majority of voters favor Arizona's strict immigration enforcement law and a plurality oppose gay marriage but these issues have fallen off the agenda, drawing little voter interest.

The survey was conducted of 750 likely voters in Minnesota between September 22 and September 26, 2010. The margin of error ranges between ± 3.6 percentage points based on the conventional calculation and ± 5.1 percentage points, which is a more cautious estimate based on professional best practices. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger. The section at the end of this report, "About the Survey,"

discusses the statistical calculations for the margin of sampling error and how to interpret it.

Presidential Politics in Minnesota

Republicans’ chances to win Minnesota in the 2012 presidential elections will depend on who they nominate. Barack Obama’s bid for reelection faces competitive challenges from Republicans Tim Pawlenty and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney in Minnesota. Obama leads against both among likely voters but he is unable to clear 50% in his matchups against the two governors. He leads Pawlenty by 9 points (49% versus 40%) and Romney by 7 points (47% versus 40%). Romney holds a 13 point edge among independents – a critical group of swing voters. All three are supported by more than 8 out of 10 of their fellow partisans, but there is a potential omen of bad news for Obama: Pawlenty and Romney are drawing support from more than 6 out of 10 of the 60% of likely voters who think the country is heading off on the wrong track.

Pawlenty and Romney Pose Competitive Challenges to Obama

Obama	Pawlenty	DK/refused/Other/Neither/ Won't Vote
49%	40%	11%
Obama	Romney	
47	40	13

Obama leads by 20 points or more over popular conservatives former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and Minnesota Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann, 56%-34% and 54%-34% respectively. In contrast to Pawlenty and Romney, Palin and Bachmann are losing a quarter of Republican voters (13% of whom prefer Obama to either Palin or Bachmann) and they are each trailing Obama by about 20 points or more among independents.

Obama Dominates Races Against Palin and Bachmann

Obama	Palin	DK/refused
56%	34%	10%
Obama	Bachmann	
54	34	12

(Percentages here and elsewhere may not sum to 100% owing to rounding or to the omission of respondents who did not answer a question.)

Obama’s Buoy

It is a bit surprising that Obama is not faring worse in Minnesota. His approval rating is below the symbolically notable 50% level (48%) and 79% of Minnesotan voters distrust Washington to do what is right.

Ominous Signs for Obama

Approve of Obama’s Job Performance	Disapprove of Obama’s Job Performance
48%	48%
Trust Government in Washington Always or Most of the Time	Trust Government in Washington Never or only Sometimes
20%	79%

Despite the political challenges facing Obama, he does have a notable and surprising strength: the economy and jobs, which are singled out by 55% of voters as the single most important national problem (four times or more concern than for any other issue). Among the majority who are primarily concerned about the economy and jobs, a majority of these voters prefer Obama to Pawlenty (52% versus 37%). Pawlenty enjoys a similar advantage on the budget deficit but only 14% rank it as the top national problem. (The matchups with Romney produced similar findings.)

Obama Advantage on Economy

	Obama	Pawlenty
Voters identifying the economy and jobs as the most important national (55%)	52%	37%

Democratic Vulnerability in Holding Congressional Seats

Democrats currently hold 5 of the 8 U.S. Congressional seats in Minnesota. This may be at risk as 50% of likely voters prefer to look around for someone else to vote for; only a third wants to reelect their representative. The disenchantment with the incumbent is strongest among Republicans, but half of independents and 41% of Democrats are not inclined to reelect the incumbent.

Congressional Incumbents Face Backlash

	Vote to Reelect Incumbent	Look around For Someone Else	DK/Refuse
All Likely Voters	34%	50%	17%
Republican (38%)	25	62	13
Independent (12%)	34	50	17
Democrat (48%)	40	41	19

Democrats Hold Edge in Minnesota Legislative Elections

The renewed interest of Democrats in the November elections has revived their party’s prospects for maintaining the majority in the Minnesota Legislature. Since August, likely

voters who express a great deal or fair amount of interest in the November elections have jumped from 47% to 82%. This jump has been fuelled in part by the increased engagement of Democrats, who now match the elevated interest level of Republicans (83%), wiping out the GOP's earlier significant advantage.

For less-visible races, the mobilization of Democrats has helped them break the August deadlock and open a lead. When Minnesota voters are asked whether they would support an unnamed Democratic or Republican candidate for the State Legislature in November, 48% expressed support for the Democrat and 37% for the Republican (15% did not offer a preference). The Democratic lead of 11 points is greater than the 2 point edge last month but short of the 16 point bulge in late October 2008.

Democratic Edge in Minnesota Legislative Elections

	August 2008	Early October 2008	Late October 2008	August 2010	September 2010
Democratic candidate	49%	45%	49%	41%	48%
Republican candidate	36%	34%	33%	39%	37%
DK/Refuse	13%	19%	16%	20%	15%

The Democratic edge has emerged despite strong disapproval of the DFL dominated Minnesota Legislature; 58% currently disapprove of its performance, similar to its rating in late August. More than 6 out of 10 Republicans and Independents disapprove of the way the legislature is handling its job, and even a majority of Democrats (53%) disapprove.

Unpopularity of Minnesota Legislature

	Handling Job in January 2008*	Handling Job in May 2010*	Handling Job in August 2010**	Handling Job in Sept. 2010**
Approve	46%	37%	25%	27%
Disapprove	44%	52%	57%	58%
DK/Refuse	10%	12%	18%	15%

*Representative sample of all adults were interviewed.

**Representative sample of likely voters were interviewed

Nonetheless, the disapproval of the Minnesota Legislature is not hurting DFL candidates. Among voters expressing disapproval of the DFL controlled legislature, 44% are still expressing a willingness to vote for DFL candidates. This may reflect the popularity of individual legislators or some confusion as to which party controls the legislature.

Whither Social Issues?

The social issues – gay marriage and immigration – are not registering as important political issues in Minnesota’s 2010 general election battles despite the lopsided views of voters. Less than five percent of voters ranked gay marriage, abortion, or immigration as the single most important issue facing the state. This disinterest in these issues reflects the tendency of the gubernatorial candidates to ignore them in public.

	Single Most Important Problem Facing Minnesota Today
Economy and Jobs	43%
Budget Deficit	15
Education	13
High Taxes	9
Health Care	8
Immigration	5
Gay Marriage	2
Abortion	2

Even as social issues have faded in the election, Minnesota voters harbor strong views toward them. By a 52% to 33% margin, voters favor the Arizona immigration law, which directs police to ask people they stop or arrest for proof of legal residency if they are suspected of not being in the country legally. This draws not only strong support from Republicans but also from 3 out of ten Democrats and 5 out of 10 independents. A plurality also opposes allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry, including 34% of Democrats and 52% of independents. However, sixty four percent from across the political spectrum do support legal agreements (or civil unions) among gays and lesbians to give them many of the same rights as married couples.

	Favor	Oppose
Arizona Immigration Law		
All Likely Voters	52%	33%
Democrats	33	51
Independents	50	34
Republicans	79	10
Gay Marriage		
All Likely Voters	41%	49%
Democrats	57	34
Independents	34	52
Republicans	23	67

About the Survey

This survey is a collaboration between Minnesota Public Radio News 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 (Center Director) and Joanne M. Miller (Associate Professor, Department of Political Science). Charles Gregory provided research assistance.

The survey was fielded by the Information Specialists Group (ISG) and is based on a landline random digit dial survey in Minnesota. ISG called a sample of telephone exchanges that was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within Minnesota. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

As is common with public opinion surveys, the data were weighted. In the first stage, the data were weighted based on the number of potential survey respondents and the number of landline telephone numbers in the household. In the second stage, data were weighted according to cell phone usage, as well as gender, age, race, and Hispanic ethnicity to approximate the demographic characteristics of the population according to the Census.

Results are based on a model that accounts for the likelihood of a respondent voting based on the following factors: self-reported probability of voting in the upcoming election, voting in the 2006 gubernatorial election as reported by the respondent, interest in the 2010 election, and whether the respondent reported being registered to vote. The model estimates a turnout of 58%, which we expect to increase during the fall as the campaign heats up and interest in the election increases.

The key characteristics of the sample's likely voters in Minnesota are the following:

	Likely Voters
Republican	38
Independent	12
Democrat	48
Men	47
Women	53
High School or less	56
Some College or more	44
Less than \$50,000	37
More than \$50,000	55

(Percentages here and above may round to higher than 100% due to rounding, or may be less than 100% due to respondents not answering a question.)

750 likely voters living in Minnesota were interviewed by telephone between September 22 and September 26, 2010. The margin of error ranges between +/-3.6 percentage points based on the conventional calculation and +/-5.1 percentage points, which is a more cautious estimate that takes into account design effects, in accordance with professional best practices. The conventional calculation of the margin of sampling error is primarily based on the number of respondents and, critically, assumes that all respondents selected for interviewing were actually reached. No public opinion survey successfully contacts the entire sample and therefore the professional best practice is to adjust for the actual response rate and for other design effects, producing a higher margin of sampling error. In this report, we use the conventional calculation to determine the minimal level of significance and the more cautious calculation to reach a higher level of confidence in the results.

Using the design-effect calculation of the margin of sample error, in 19 cases out of 20 the results among Minneapolis voters will differ (in theory) by no more than +/-5.1 percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by interviewing all likely voters in the election. The response rate is 26 percent (based on AAPOR response rate calculation 4).

The results of properly conducted scientific surveys of candidate support estimate the most probable relative positions at the time of the interviewing. The margin of error indicates a range of support with unequal probabilities of accuracy. For example, assume a poll reports that Candidate A received 55% and Candidate B received 45% of support with a margin of error of +/-5 percentage points. Based on normal sampling distribution, the 55% to 45% result is the best or most probable standing at the time of the survey. Taking into account the margin of sampling error, however, we can estimate the lower boundary of support for Candidate A as 50% and the upper boundary of support for Candidate B as 50%. These results are possible but are less probable.

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.

This survey invested considerable resources in a set of procedures to reduce distortions. The sample of interviewees was drawn using comprehensive lists of phone exchanges. In addition, the interviewers were carefully trained and monitored to maintain consistency in implementing the questionnaire. Further, several steps were used to capture as much of the sample as possible including call backs to numbers when no one appeared to be at home or when the initial request to conduct the interview was not accepted.