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Polls provide insight into Kentucky political landscape

BY RONNIE ELLIS CNHI Kentucky 12 hrs ago



FRANKFORT — Both state and national polls released Tuesday show more Kentucky voters approve of Gov. Matt Bevin than disapprove, but his approval rate is below 50 percent in both polls.

The same two polls show U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., continues to be very unpopular nationally and even in his home state. In fact, according to national pollster The Morning Consult, McConnell, the U.S. Senate Majority Leader, is the most unpopular senator in the country. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders is the most popular.

The Big Red Poll, conducted by 150 Western Kentucky University students and overseen by WKU political science professor and Director of the WKU Social Science Research Center Joel Turner, indicates 43 percent of respondents approve of Bevin's performance while 42 percent disapprove; 15 percent didn't know enough to form an opinion.

The Morning Consult poll puts Bevin's approval rate at 45 percent with 41 percent disapproving; after rounding, 15 percent didn't have an opinion.

The Big Red Poll indicates 24 percent of respondents have a favorable impression of McConnell while 46 percent have an unfavorable impression. The Morning Consult poll has McConnell's favorability rating at 33 and his unfavorable at 55.

Those low numbers aren't anything new for McConnell. Yet he continues to be re-elected, the last time in 2014 by 14 points over Democratic Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes.

Turner said voters may be differentiating between how "likable" McConnell is and how effective he is.

"His claim to fame is his effectiveness," Turner said. "You can be disliked and still do the job well enough to be seen as effective."

McConnell also does better among Republicans, according to The Morning Consult poll — 50-41 — and Kentucky continues to trend Republican. McConnell's position as Majority Leader is also a selling point in Kentucky — although he is often the target of national conservative groups and activists. The latest of those is former Trump advisor Steve Bannon who has promised to support Republican senate candidates who oppose McConnell as Majority Leader.

The Big Red Poll was conducted Oct. 16-20 and Oct. 23-27, polling 572 Kentucky residents using both land line and cellphones. It has a margin of error of 4.13 percent.

Turner said the poll didn't test public support for Bevin's proposed fix to the state's badly underfunded public pension systems because it was conducted before Bevin released a draft bill last Friday — also the last day of the poll.

But Turner said respondents were asked who is to blame for the pension crisis.

"They have an overwhelming willingness to blame the legislature," Turner said, adding that he plans to release those poll results later.

Lawmakers have tried repeatedly to avoid blame by saying they funded the pension systems according to requests from governors and the pension boards, but many retirees and state workers say lawmakers are to blame because they knew their appropriations were insufficient.

Turner said the concerns over pensions might have contributed to Bevin's favorability numbers being a bit lower than he expected because "he's the front man for it," but he said they don't blame Bevin for the crisis.

The poll asked respondents about several national issues:

- 58 percent of Kentuckians support increasing the minimum wage
- 60 percent of Kentuckians believe Obamacare should be repealed and replaced
- 55 percent of Kentuckians oppose building a wall to control illegal immigration
- 55 percent of Kentuckians believe community college should be free for anyone who wants to attend
- 54 percent of Kentuckians believe recreational use of marijuana should be decriminalized.

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