

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
MASSACHUSETTS U.S. SENATE POLL
Sept. 22-28, 2011 - 1,005 Registered Voters (RVs)

Sampling error on full sample is +/- 3.8 percentage points, larger for subgroups and for some questions asked of a random half-sample

Complete survey questionnaire and responses, with supplementary tables and graphics, are at <http://uml.edu/poll>

Analysis by Mike Mokrzycki / Oct. 3, 2011

Setting the scene for what will be one of the most closely watched U.S. Senate races in 2012, the inaugural survey by the Center for Public Opinion at the University of Massachusetts Lowell finds Democrat Elizabeth Warren – who only joined the race in mid-September – already is competitive with Republican incumbent Scott Brown, who won the seat in an upset last year.

The representative poll of 1,005 Massachusetts registered voters, conducted Sept. 22-28 by landline and cell phone, finds 41% say they likely will vote for Brown in November 2012 and 38% for Warren. That difference is within the survey's sampling error margin of plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.

Brown runs strongly among independents – a critical group for any Republican seeking statewide office in heavily Democratic Massachusetts – as he remains personally popular and gets good grades overall for how he's handling his job as senator. He appears to be capitalizing on voters' sour mood about the country's direction generally and economy in particular. But he may be slipping among ideological moderates amid a perception, held by 48% of voters, that he's not doing enough to help the middle class – a group Warren is championing in her nascent campaign. And Brown seeks re-election in a state where majorities of voters favor Democratic prescriptions on issues and are dissatisfied – in nearly one in four cases, "angry" – with policies offered by Brown's Republican peers in Congress.

Warren, meanwhile, appears to have a large early lead for the Democratic nomination for Senate – 36% of potential Democratic primary voters say they prefer her at this point; none of the other five announced candidates gets more than 5%. All six will join in a debate Tuesday night (Oct. 4) sponsored by UMass Lowell and the Boston Herald.

Name recognition is an important underlying factor at this point for the primary and general election vote preference tests. More than a third of registered voters in this poll – 37% – said they hadn't yet heard of Warren (only 8% said that of Brown). Among the other five Democratic primary candidates, each is unknown by from 60% to 75% of voters. The poll found many voters simply haven't started following the race closely yet:

- 15% are following the Senate campaign “very closely” and 34% are following “somewhat closely,” with the rest split between “not too closely,” 27%, and “not closely at all,” 22%. Democrats are following the race about as closely as Republicans.
- Among voters following the race “very closely,” Warren leads Brown 56%-38%. These candidates are about even (Warren 45%, Brown 42%) among those following the campaign “somewhat closely” and Brown leads 41% to 28% among those who are less engaged in the race right now. Partisanship and ideology do not explain this as there’s much less difference in interest in the campaign by those factors.

The poll began little more than a week after Warren announced her candidacy on Sept. 14 with a statewide speaking tour. She also gained attention for a widely circulated YouTube video in which she defended taxation on corporations as part of the social contract.

Against Brown, Warren apparently gets some support simply by virtue of being a Democrat, as Brown does for being a Republican. The trial heat question explicitly mentioned the candidates’ party affiliation – and among voters who say they’re likely to vote for Warren, 22% said in an earlier question that they hadn’t heard of her yet. Meanwhile, 44% of likely Brown voters said they have never heard of Warren.

Other findings on the general election trial heat:

- There is a slight gender gap; men favor Brown by 8 points, 44% to 36%, while women split about evenly, 39% for Warren and 38% for Brown.
- Post-graduates strongly prefer Warren, the Harvard Law School professor and former Obama administration official – 54% say they likely would vote for her, vs. only 29% for Brown. Brown leads 46% to 37% among college graduates and 42% to 34% among those with some college or less educational attainment.

A REPUBLICAN IN MASSACHUSETTS

Any Republican seeking statewide office faces an inherently uphill struggle: This poll finds self-described Democrats outnumber Republicans by 2-to-1, 34% to 17%. But the plurality partisan group here is independents (47% of this poll’s sample). Brown won independents by 66% to 34% in the 2010 special election against Democrat Martha Coakley, according to a poll of voters shortly after the election by The Washington Post, Harvard School of Public Health and Kaiser Family Foundation. In the new UMass Lowell poll, Brown leads Brown among independents by 48% to 29%, with most of the rest undecided.

As he did in 2010, Brown in this poll peels away more Democrats (16% of those who initially identify that way) than Warren gets from Republicans (6%) in the trial heat question. And Brown is generally viewed favorably by 39% of Democrats, as well as 31% who said they voted for Coakley in 2010 and 27% who say they’re likely to back Warren in 2012.

Beyond party identification is ideology. Asked to describe their political views in general, moderates are a plurality (43%), with liberals and conservatives about evenly split among the rest. (Nationally, conservatives tend to outnumber liberals on this measure by about 2-to-1.) In the 2010 election, Brown won moderates by 13 points in the Washington Post poll (56% to 43% for Coakley) but the new poll indicates he's slipped among this group: 44% of moderates say they'd likely vote for Warren, 38% for Brown.

In general election trial heats, Brown only clears 50% support against one of the six official Democratic candidates¹, though he holds clear leads over all except Elizabeth Warren. (The day after the poll was completed, a seventh candidate, Setti Warren, withdrew from the race.)

On the other hand, Brown trails narrowly in hypothetical matchups against two Democrats who opted not to run for Senate – Gov. Deval Patrick (by 43% to 36%) and former Rep. Joe Kennedy (45% to 37%). And Brown (41%) runs about even against state Attorney General Martha Coakley (40%), whom he beat by 5 points in the 2010 election and who also decided not to run this time.

MOOD AND ISSUES

Overall, Massachusetts voters are in sour about the nation's direction, and they generally prefer Democratic policy priorities. In 2010 Brown rode the former to victory despite the latter (and against a candidate considered a weak campaigner). Putting the contest in context:

- 62% say things in this country today are “seriously off on the wrong track” as opposed to “generally going in the right direction,” comparable to the mood of the January 2010 Senate electorate as measured in the Washington Post post-election poll. Brown won 66% of “wrong track” voters in 2010 but only leads Warren 48% to 34% among them in this survey of all potential voters.
- 48% of registered voters say the nation's economy is getting worse, and Brown leads Warren 49% to 28% among them. Warren leads by a comparable margin, 51% to 32%, among voters who say the economy is getting better, but only 11% say that. Warren leads 47% to 34% among the 40% who say the economy is staying about the same.
- 35% of voters say someone in their household has been laid off since the most recent U.S. recession began in 2007. That includes 17% of the poll respondents themselves.

¹ In the 1990s polling data suggested the 50% threshold was an important marker for a known incumbent's re-election prospects; research found that two in three incumbents who fell short of that mark in pre-election polling wound up losing to the lesser-known challenger. However, this “incumbent rule” has failed to hold in more recent years, according to research presented at the 2011 conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. And the true test of the rule is in polling much closer to the election in any event

- Asked what one issue they'd most like to hear the Democratic Senate candidates talk about in their debate at UML, 27% mentioned jobs and unemployment and 20% said the economy. No other issue came close - health care and insurance was next at 8%, taxes 6% and the federal debt and deficit/government spending cited by 5%.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT, AND ITS SPENDING

52% say "government should do more to solve problems" vs. 40% who say "government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals." This split was 50% to 47% in in the 2010 special election, according to the January 2010 Washington Post poll).

- In Massachusetts today, even 37% of self-described conservatives and about three in 10 of Republicans say government should do more to solve problems. But only 16% of Tea Party supporters hold that view.

A 55% majority says it's more important to keep Social Security and Medicare benefits as they are, vs. 29% who give priority to reducing the federal deficit (13% volunteer that both are equally important).

- Nearly half (47%) of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, as well as Tea Party supporters, say the deficit is more important. However, sizable proportions of those inclined to favor smaller government still say it's more important to protect entitlement benefits: 38% of fiscal conservatives, 36% of Republicans and Republican leaners, and 34% of Tea Party supporters.

On health care reform, a plurality says the Massachusetts law enacted under then-Gov. Mitt Romney in 2006 was "about right" (45%, vs. 28% who say it "went too far" and 18% who say it "didn't go far enough." On national health care reform signed by President Obama in 2010, 31% say it was about right, 32% think it went too far and 27% say it didn't go far enough.

- Opposition to the federal plan then being crafted was a major element of Brown's 2010 campaign, and a majority of his likely voters (56%) say that law wound up going too far – though 21% of them say it was about right and 15% say it didn't go far enough.
- On an issue that thus far has been more prominent in the Republican presidential campaign than the Senate race, Massachusetts registered voters are split about evenly on whether an illegal immigrant who graduated from a high school here should qualify for in-state college tuition (46%) or not (48%).

One factor working in Brown's favor is intensity of opinion about policy. He leads by larger margins among voters who reject Democratic policy prescriptions (such as on the role of government, protecting entitlements vs. curbing deficits, and health care reform) than Warren's edge among voters who take the Democratic view on those issues.

VIEWS OF BROWN

Far more view Brown favorably (52%) than unfavorably (29%) overall. (Among the fewer voters who have heard of her, Warren is viewed favorably by 30% and unfavorably by 18%.

- More than one in four Elizabeth Warren voters (27%) view Brown favorably; 10% of likely Brown voters see Warren favorably, though at least half have not yet heard of her at all (44%) or have heard of her but have no opinion about her (14%).

And more approve than disapprove of how Brown has handed his job as U.S. senator, by nearly identical 53% to 29%. But this sentiment, whether positive or negative, is not very intense; only 15% say they strongly approve of the work he's done as U.S. senator, while 37% "somewhat approve;" 17% somewhat disapprove and 12% strongly disapprove.

Brown is more popular than the policies offered by his peers. Six in 10 (60%) of voters are dissatisfied by policies offered by congressional Republicans, including 23% who say they're angry (compare to feelings about the Obama administration: 35% dissatisfied but only 9% angry.) Then again, the ratings of congressional Republicans were virtually identical when Brown was first elected (per the January 2010 Washington Post poll).

Warren is positioning herself as a champion of the middle class – and that's a potential vulnerability for Brown. Nearly half of registered voters, 48%, say the Republican incumbent is doing too little for the economic interests of the middle class; 37% say he's doing about the right amount, and 4% say he's doing too much.

- Even 31% of those who report they're likely to vote for Brown over Warren in 2012 say he's doing too little for the middle class (as do 30% who reported voting for him in 2010). This view is shared by 40% of self-described conservatives and 34% of Tea Party supporters (who comprise 14% of the state's voters).

When asked how much Brown is doing for the economic interests of Wall Street financial institutions (which are heavy contributors to his campaign), 24% say he's done too much, 31% the right amount and 22% too little, with 23% giving no opinion.

When he ran in 2010 Brown vowed to be an "independent voice for Massachusetts." Fifty percent of the state's voters say he has indeed lived up to that promise, but 41% say he has not.

More say Brown met (46%) or exceeded (8%) their expectations in office than fallen short (34%). By comparison, only 36% say Obama has met expectations, with 7% saying he's exceeded them; more than half, 54%, say he's fallen short.

About half of voters (49%) say that ideologically Brown is "about right" - even though MA voters themselves on the whole are less conservative than Brown is, judging by his statements

and voting record. (Overall, 27% of registered voters said that in general their political views are liberal, 43% said they are moderate and 26% called themselves conservative.) This could be in part because MA voters, like Brown, tend to be more conservative on fiscal issues (37% describe themselves that way) than social issues (22%).

VIEWS OF OBAMA, BY COMPARISON

just 34% say Obama compromises with Republicans “about the right amount”; 33% say he compromises too much, 25% not enough. (By comparison, 50% say Brown compromises with Democrats “about the right amount,” though among the rest, far more say he doesn’t compromise enough, 32%. than that he compromises too much, 8%.

Obama himself remains personally popular in Massachusetts, with 61% of registered voters saying that overall they have a favorable view of him.

The poll also included trial heats of two potential 2012 presidential general election matchups - and Obama appears to face no real threat in Massachusetts. Obama won the state with 62% of the vote in 2008 and he does comparably well now when registered voters were asked for whom they would vote if the presidential election were today:

- Obama 62%, Rick Perry 25%, don’t know 10%
- Obama 57%, Mitt Romney 33%, don’t know 7%

The poll also asked general views about Obama and these two prospective challengers:

- Obama: 61% favorable, 34% unfavorable, 4% heard of him but are undecided
- Romney: 45% favorable, 43% unfavorable, 7% undecided, 4% haven’t heard of him
- Perry: 18% favorable, 44% unfavorable, 12% undecided, 25% haven’t heard of him

The poll began the night of a Republican presidential debate in which Perry’s performance was widely panned, and after Obama had proposed and made numerous speeches about his plans to create jobs and reduce the deficit.

Despite his personal popularity and re-election prospects, Obama faces ambivalence among his base. While 85 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents have an overall favorable view of him, 26 percent of them are dissatisfied with his administration's policies. That's up 8 points from a Washington Post poll in Massachusetts right after Brown won the special election in January 2010. And, as noted, half of Democrats said Obama has compromised with Republicans too much, while more than four in 10 said that as president he's fallen short of their expectations.

The author of this analysis, Mike Mokrzycki, is an independent survey research consultant who produced this survey for the University of Massachusetts Lowell. <http://mjmsurvey.com>