

What's Driving Voter Opinion in the Twin Cities Metro?

Trends from the Field and Implications for 2018

In 2016, Minnesota voters nearly broke the state's long-standing Democratic streak when Donald Trump came within 1.5 percent (just 45,000 votes) of being the first Republican to win the state since 1972. As North Star State voters return to the polls this fall to elect a new governor (along with two U.S. senators, several U.S. House members, all state constitutional offices and the entire Statehouse), the state's power balance remains on a razor's edge.

While Democratic support in urban counties like Hennepin and Ramsey has remained consistent, Democratic votes in nonurban areas dropped from 49 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2016. The Cook Political Report recently moved its rating of the upcoming Minnesota governor's race from "Lean Democrat" to "Toss-Up." To win statewide this fall will require effective voter engagement in both the urban base and suburban/exurban communities and small towns of Greater Minnesota.

With more than 265,000 members in 87 counties, Working America has been on the ground in Minnesota for over a dozen years. In that time, we've helped win **more than 60 races** and developed particular expertise mobilizing working-class voters in both metro Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota. Working America's Front Porch Focus Group series builds on this organizing capacity, combining a large-scale listening project with quantitative analysis of voters' responses. In this Front Porch Focus Group report, we assess Minnesota's political landscape and identify trends and openings to exploit this fall.

During our three-week engagement in February, we spoke with 1,118 voters in Democratic base neighborhoods in the Twin Cities (432 conversations) and in swing areas such as House Districts 49A and 14B (686 conversations), which have trended away from Democrats in recent election cycles. We talked face to face with voters to understand the issues that matter to them, their economic outlook for their community and their organizational attachment to civic groups. We ask them to rate the job performance of Gov. Mark Dayton as well as former Gov. Tim Pawlenty. We also explored their views on state taxes, inquiring about who they believed was or was not paying their fair share. Our conversations revealed points of vulnerability for Democratic candidates as well as opportunities for progressives to lift up and champion key issues.

Key Findings

- **Many voters were undecided about job approval of Gov. Dayton and former Gov. Pawlenty.** Alarming, 1 in 3 likely Democratic voters doesn't have an opinion about Dayton's job performance. When it comes to Pawlenty, a plurality of voters has no opinion on his job performance. The prevalence of undecided voters reveals a low information baseline that will require effective engagement.
- **Pawlenty — widely rumored to be preparing for another run for the GOP nomination — has support among strong Republican voters,** but many voters anecdotally connect him to the I-35W bridge collapse and disapprove of his school funding choices.
- **Voters' views on education and the fairness of the tax system are the strongest indicators of support for Dayton.**
- **More than 2 out of 5 voters don't believe any politician fights for their interests, and they don't have connections to formal organizations that offer them information about politics.**

Discussion of Findings

1. Many voters were undecided about job approval of Gov. Dayton and former Gov. Pawlenty.

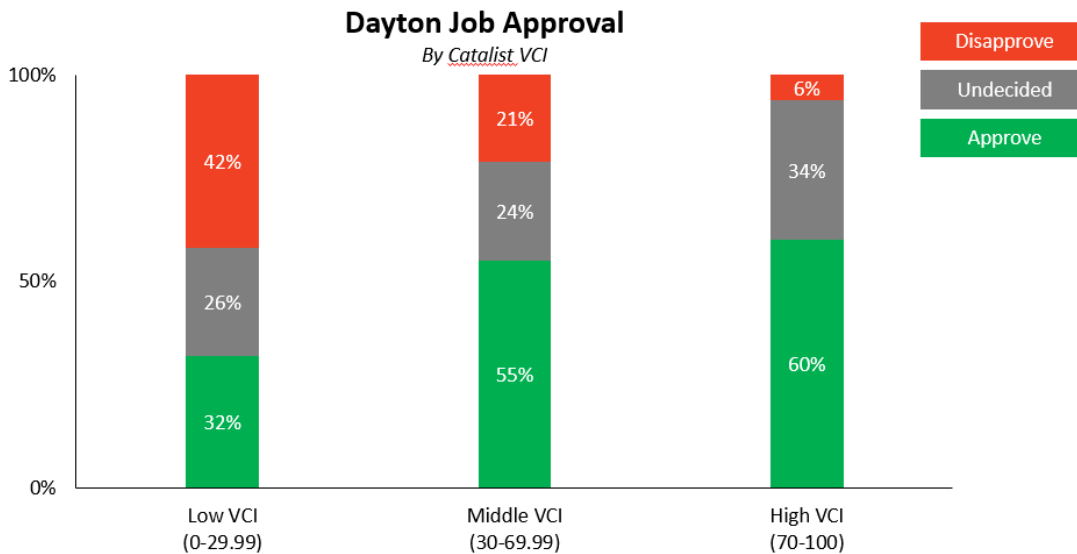
Gov. Mark Dayton has served for two terms in Minnesota, and Gov. Tim Pawlenty was governor for two terms prior to that. When we asked voters to rate the job performance of each politician, a remarkable number of Minnesotans said they were undecided about both Dayton and Pawlenty, frequently sharing that they didn't have enough information to make a decision.

For the most part, Dayton's job approval follows the expected partisan trend. Using the Catalist Vote Choice Index score, which assigns a value of 0-100 to each voter, with higher scores signaling Democratic support and lower scores signaling GOP support, we broke voters into three segments: low (0-29); middle (31-70); high (71-100). As expected, Dayton's approval stands at 60 percent with high-VCI-score voters. Among low-VCI-score voters, the plurality (42 percent) disapprove of Dayton's job performance, but nearly a third of low-VCI-score voters approves (32 percent). Among swing voters, Dayton's job approval is solid at 55 percent. Voters who approve of Dayton tend to see him as bipartisan and capable of compromise.

Valerie, 31, approved of Dayton and said he "supports all Minnesotans," including minorities and people with disabilities.

Michael, 58, said he liked Dayton because he "goes across the aisle." Michael said, "We have to work together," and illustrated his point by interlocking his fingers.

Across voters in the different VCI score segments, however, the unexpectedly high number of undecideds was cause for concern and shows a considerable voting segment in play in the coming election. It is troubling that more than a third of likely Democratic voters is undecided about a governor who has been in office for nearly a decade. This finding suggests there is a need to engage high-VCI-score voters who should be with us to fill the implicit information gap.



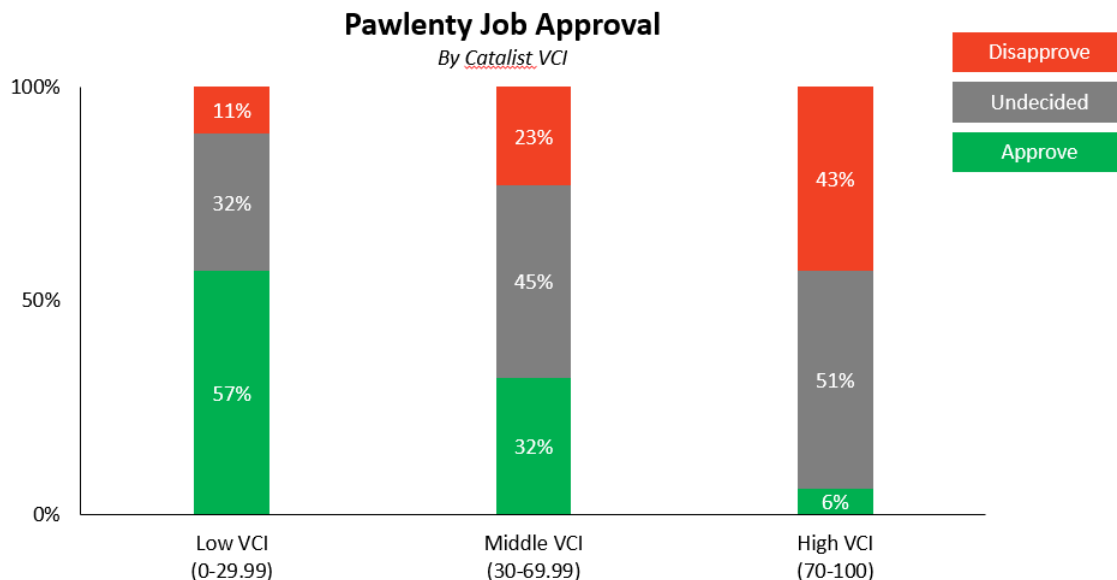
Note: VCI refers to “vote choice index,” a proprietary measure developed by Catalist. VCI is a scale from 0-100, with higher scores indicating a likelihood to vote for Democrats and lower scores indicating a likelihood to vote for Republicans.

When it comes to Pawlenty, the number of voters who are undecided on his job performance is even higher. The concerning news for Democrats is that over half of solid Democratic voters are undecided about Pawlenty’s job performance, along with an additional 45 percent of swing voters. This may be because he hasn’t been in office for nearly a decade, but it suggests that Democrats have work to do to define Pawlenty and his record with both base and swing voters.

While Dayton won’t be on the ballot this fall, the lack of strong opinions about both Pawlenty and Dayton indicate that campaigns will have the ability to significantly shape the electorate’s opinion about the gubernatorial candidates.

2. Pawlenty — widely rumored to be preparing for another run for the GOP nomination — has support among strong Republican voters, but many voters anecdotally connect him to the I-35W bridge collapse and disapprove of his school funding choices.

Pawlenty’s job approval follows the expected partisan trend. Among low-VCI-score voters, Pawlenty’s job approval rating stands at 57 percent, versus 11 percent who disapprove. These low-VCI-score voters made up 29 percent of the 2014 electorate, suggesting a strong starting point among this segment as Pawlenty enters the GOP nominating contests. Outside of the GOP base, 32 percent of mid-VCI-score voters (accounting for 34.5 percent of the 2014 electorate) and 6 percent of high-VCI-score voters (36 percent of the 2014 electorate) approve of Pawlenty.



Pawlenty is the clear front-runner in the Republican field and the greatest threat to a Democratic challenger in 2018. Since he hasn't been governor for nearly a decade, we set out to understand what has stuck in people's minds about his time in office.

After his failed presidential bid in 2012, Pawlenty became president and CEO of Financial Services Roundtable, where he earned more than \$2.5 million per year lobbying on behalf of large banks and insurance companies. In our conversations with voters about Pawlenty, his time as a lobbyist never came up.

What did stand out in our conversations about Pawlenty were two key issues — infrastructure and the state budget. In 2007, in the midst of evening rush hour, the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed into the Mississippi River, killing 13 people and injuring another 145. Many voters drew connections between Pawlenty and the collapse of the I-35W bridge.

John, a retired 60-year-old, said his top issue was infrastructure. He said, "I don't like it when bridges fall down; if it's broke, fix it." He described Pawlenty as "pennywise and pound foolish," when it came to the state budget. When asked if he approved of Pawlenty, John said, "Forget it, I hate that guy."

Even among voters who approved of Pawlenty, his record on infrastructure was seen as problematic.

Mark, a 68-year-old small-business owner, described himself as a moderate Democrat. He approved of Pawlenty because he saw him as "willing to reach across and work with both political parties." Yet, he said "I very much disagree with his views of transportation."

Voters also drew connections between Pawlenty's approval of the construction of Target Field (a baseball stadium) and his borrowing of funds from the state's education and low-income programs.

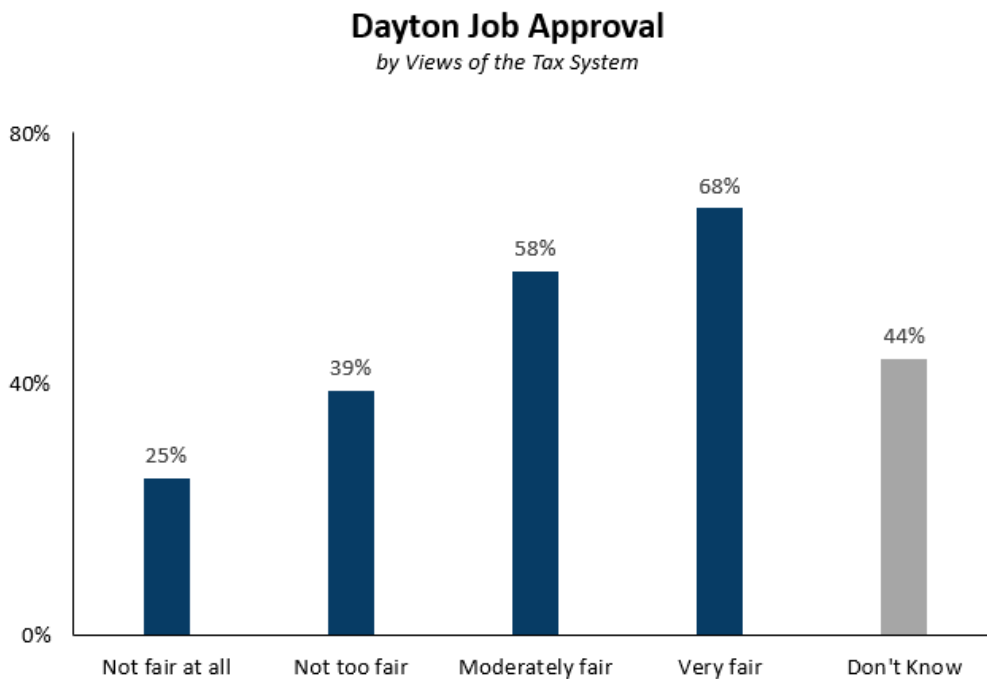
Ralph, a 64-year-old, self-identified Independent, approved of Pawlenty but said he "cooked the books" and performed a "bait-and-switch, mortgaging our future" in order to balance the budget.

Perceptions about Pawlenty among swing voters should give Democrats some pause as well as sense of possibility. Just over 32 percent of mid-VCI-score voters in both base and swing turf approve of

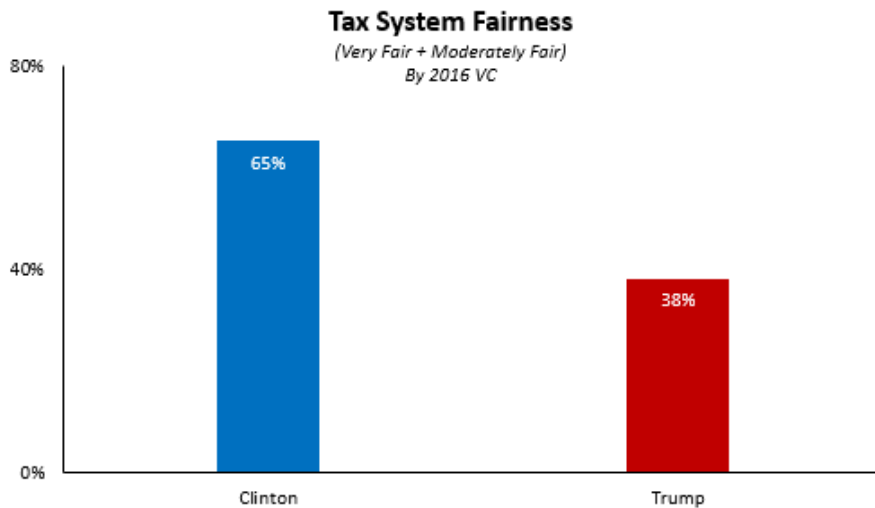
Pawlenty's job performance, and another 45 percent are undecided. Anecdotally, infrastructure repeatedly came up as a real concern for voters. It is worth exploring further through an experiment-informed program (EIP) whether this issue could benefit Democrats' efforts to prevail in the fall. More importantly, an EIP can answer a critical question: How do we move voters toward Democrats most effectively to make up the substantial vote deficit?

3. Voters' views on education and the fairness of the tax system are the strongest indicators of support for Dayton.

In addition to assessing opinions of Dayton and Pawlenty, we spoke with voters about a broad range of issues, including how they viewed the fairness of the tax system. We found that Dayton's approval is linked to opinions of the tax system. Regardless of their VCI score, voters' views on the tax system were the strongest predictor of whether they would approve of Dayton. Among voters who saw the tax system as "very fair," Dayton has a high approval of 68 percent. On the other hand, among voters who said the tax system was "not fair at all," Dayton has just 25 percent approval.

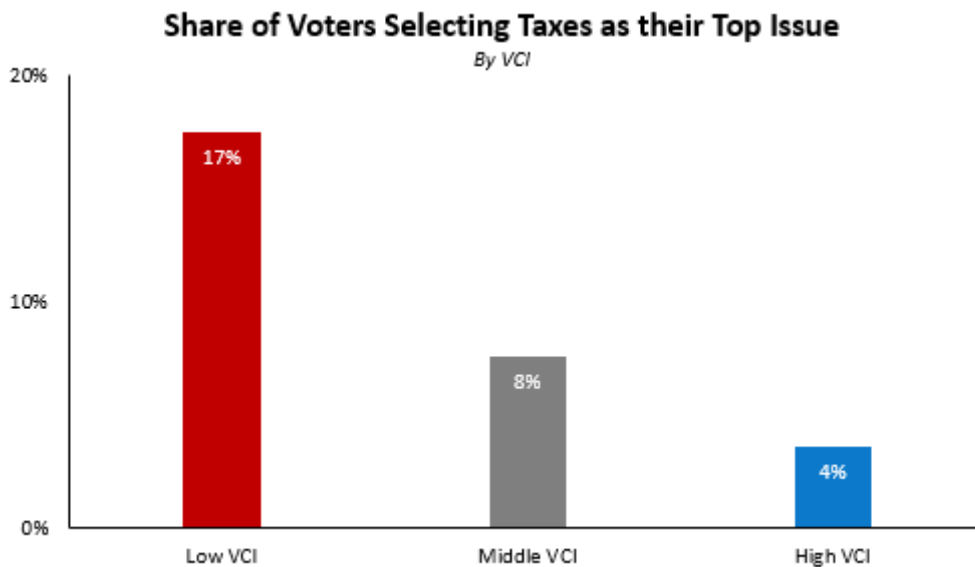


Who are the people who are upset with the tax system? Sorting voters based on their 2016 presidential vote reveals a significant difference between Clinton and Trump voters in their perceptions of the fairness of the tax system.



We also asked voters if they felt that “poor people” and corporations paid a fair share of taxes. Again, stark differences emerged when we sorted by 2016 vote choice. Among Trump voters, 63 percent think corporations pay their fair share of taxes, compared to just 16 percent of Clinton voters. Nearly 3 out of 4 Clinton voters think poor people pay their fair share of taxes, compared to just under half of Trump voters.

All told, 9 percent of the voters we spoke with picked taxes as their top issue. Who are these tax-sensitive voters? They’re somewhat older, high-income and more likely to vote Republican than the rest of the voters we spoke with. Nearly three-quarters of tax-sensitive voters pulled the lever for Trump in 2016, and a similar number said they paid more than their fair share of taxes. They’re significantly more likely than other voters to believe that corporations pay their fair share of taxes.



Low-VCI-score voters are more likely to be tax-sensitive. In our work on the state Senate District 54 special election, Karla Bigham was attacked as a “tax-and-spend liberal.” We saw that even after Bigham was attacked from the right on taxes, only a slim segment of voters was moved by this messaging.

Quick stats — tax-sensitive voters

- **9 percent** of the voters we spoke with picked taxes as their top issue.
- **76 percent** said they pay more than their fair share of taxes (43 percent overall).
- **74 percent** voted for Trump (28 percent overall).
- **57 percent** said the poor pay enough in taxes (65 percent overall).
- **60 percent** said corporations pay enough in taxes (35 percent overall).
- **\$91k** average income (\$78k overall)
- **30.5 VCI** (44.8 overall)
- **Age 58** (51 overall)

Those who list taxes as their top issue are far more likely to approve of Pawlenty. Similarly, those who pick education as their top issue are far more likely to approve of Dayton. However, when we broke out both Democratic base and swing voters on the issues, we saw that education rises to the top among the issues.

Richard, 45, said the \$6.1 billion surplus in 2016 should have gone to “families to help pay for child care and education.” He said he wants to see more programs in place that “keep kids in high school and also propel them towards further education.”

Natalie, a 32-year-old dermatologist, said that college has become so expensive that “going to school and getting out of debt is nearly impossible.” She said there’s a “shortage of physicians in Minnesota due to people’s lack of ability to pay for college.”

More people in Minnesota select education as their top issue compared to other states we work in. Education is clearly top of mind for many Minnesota voters.

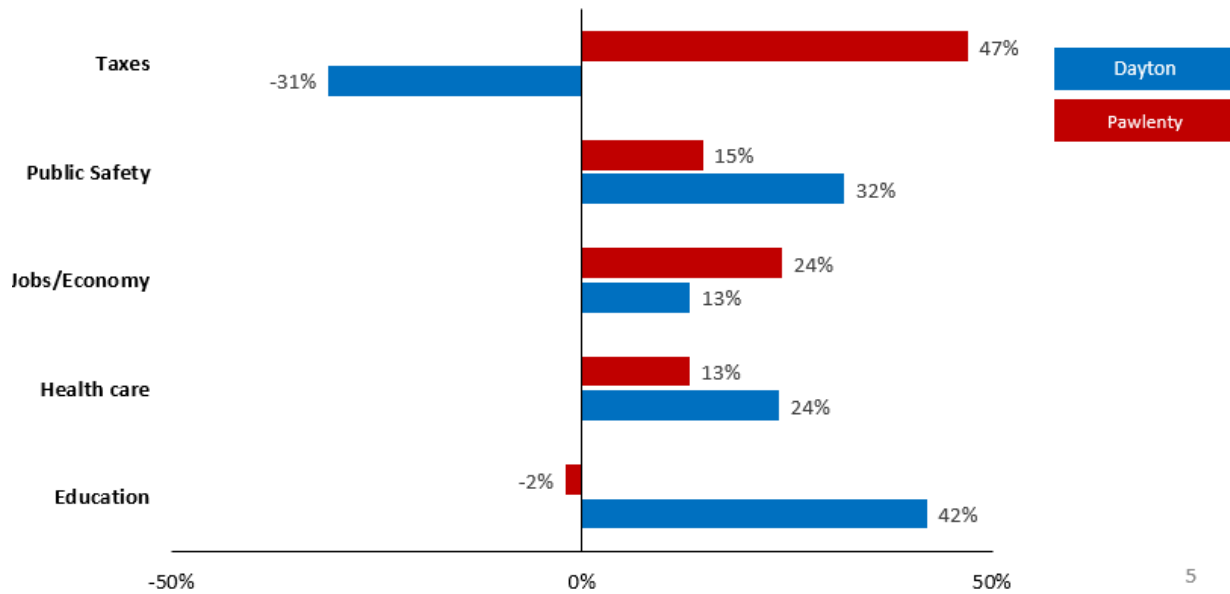
Top Issues in Minnesota (adjusted for lean)

Issue	Percent of Respondents Picking the Issue
Education	18 percent
Health Care	13 percent
Jobs/Economy	13 percent
Public Safety	9 percent
Taxes	9 percent

While those who pick education as their top issue generally approve of Dayton, there isn’t a corresponding disapproval of Pawlenty. This suggests that there is an opportunity to drive down Pawlenty’s approval among voters who prioritize education as their top issue.

Dayton and Pawlenty Net Job Approval By Issue

(Adjusted for Partisan Lean)



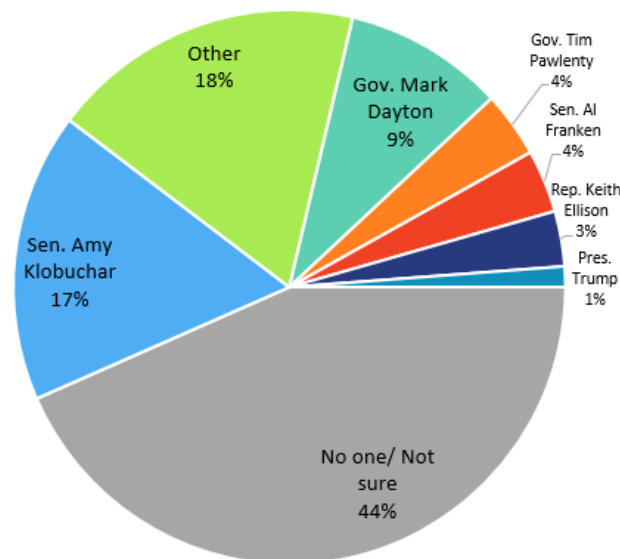
When Dayton ran in 2010, he criticized then-Gov. Pawlenty for cutting education funding by \$1,300 per student. During Pawlenty’s governorship, at least 10 school districts switched to four-day weeks to reduce costs. Democrats would do well to remind voters of Pawlenty’s record on education.

4. More than 2 out of 5 voters don’t believe any politician is fighting for their interests, and they don’t have connections to formal organizations that offer them information about politics.

We asked voters whether they could identify a politician who they felt was fighting for working people. More than 2 out of 5 voters (44 percent) said they couldn’t.

Who in Minnesota is fighting for working people?

All Respondents



Our conversations with voters revealed that they are looking for someone who can work with politicians on both sides of the aisle to get things done. When we asked what qualities voters wanted in their next governor, we heard widespread support for bipartisanship, honesty and authenticity.

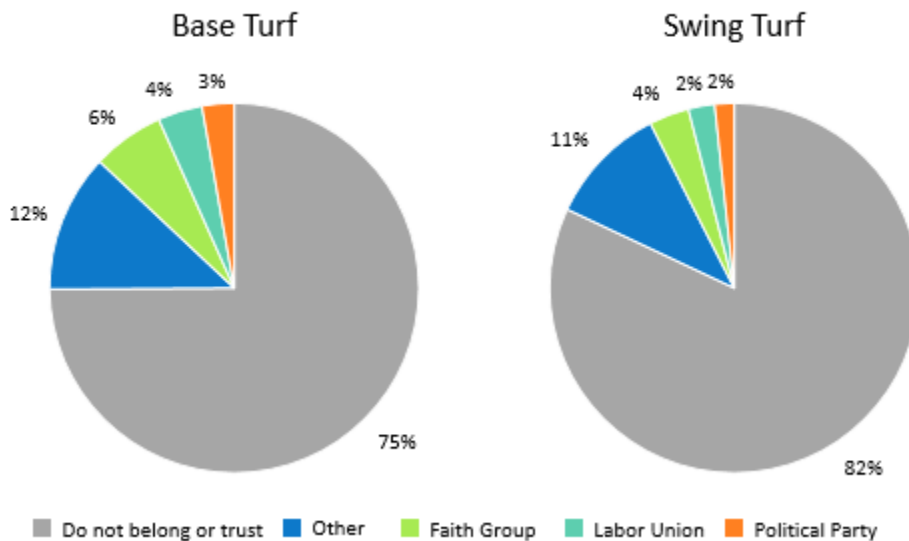
Diane, a 50-year-old accountant, said she wanted the next governor to be someone who is “willing to work with both sides and compromise.” She cited Sen. Amy Klobuchar as an example of someone who “gets things done” and “genuinely wants to find the right answers.”

Kelly, 38, said she wanted the next governor to be moderate, specifically someone who would “bring the two parties together.” She supported both Dayton and Pawlenty because she believed “both men have good intentions.”

Regardless of political affiliation, voters are disenchanted with the status quo, and they’re looking for politicians who will bridge divides between parties and bring about positive change.

We asked voters whether they belonged to an organization that offered them political information. Across all of our conversations, an overwhelming majority of voters — nearly 3 out of 4 — were not part of any formal organization that communicated with them about politics (74 percent). Three percent of the people we spoke with said they belonged to faith groups or labor unions, and just 2 percent said they belonged to a political party. This lack of trusted messengers poses a problem for anyone trying to engage and mobilize voters in Minnesota.

Membership in an Organization that Provides Trusted Political Information



When we break down responses to this question by base and swing turf, we see that in swing communities, an even higher proportion of voters doesn’t belong to an organization that offers political information. Fully 82 percent of voters in swing turf do not belong to any formal organization, compared to 75 percent in base turf. Conventional wisdom dictates that political parties will lock down base voters and ensure that they turn out to vote. Our data suggest that attachment to political parties is weaker than required in order for that strategy to be successful.

Conclusion

In a decidedly purple state, with an electorate clamoring for bipartisanship, Pawlenty is poised to make a competitive run for the governorship. He has high name recognition, a proven record in the state, and crossover appeal. High numbers of voters don't have strong opinions about the past two governors, which poses both a substantial risk and an opportunity for opponents of Pawlenty. The high number of likely Democratic and swing voters who are undecided about Pawlenty's job performance is especially concerning.

In the recent special election in Pennsylvania's 18th district, voters were bombarded with campaign communications and overwhelmed by the negative tenor of the race. It took a canvasser from an independent organization unaffiliated with either party knocking on their door to break through. By having a face-to-face conversation grounded in the issues voters cared about, especially health care and retirement security, we were able to change minds and build enthusiasm for Conor Lamb.

Working America's canvass-centered model is just what's needed to directly engage with voters. By knocking on doors and having face-to-face conversations, we can overcome the lack of membership in organizations that share political information and reach the broad swath of undecided voters. How we leverage the issues that are top of mind to move candidate voice choice could be further studied in an experiment-informed program, in which we combine canvassing with analytics and targeting in order to identify persuadable voters and learn how to persuade them. This Front Porch Focus Group report raises a number of questions that an EIP-informed canvass program could answer to help claim as many votes as possible for Democrats as efficiently as possible.

Methodology

From Feb. 20 to Feb. 28 and March 14-16, Working America held 1,118 conversations.

In Minneapolis, we canvassed in the Powderhorn and Lowry Hill East (The Wedge) neighborhoods. In St. Paul, we canvassed in the Summit-University and West Seventh neighborhoods. We also canvassed in Arden Hills, Brooklyn Center, Burnsville, Cottage Grove, Edina and St. Cloud.

Working America utilized America Votes Minnesota's voter targets when conducting this study. When canvassing in base turf in the Twin Cities proper, we contacted their turnout targets (roughly defined as high partisan voters who are less likely to vote). When canvassing in swing turf in the Twin Cities suburbs, we contacted their persuasion voters (or likely voting undetermined voters).

To get a more precise indicator of the partisan leanings of voters, we used the Catalist Vote Choice Index (VCI) score, which assigns a value of 0-100 to each voter, with higher scores signaling Democratic support and lower scores signaling GOP support.

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