

Internal poll shows most N.J. voters question Corzine's integrity

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William Perlman/The Star-LedgerGov Jon Corzine

Jon Corzine won the governorship three years ago by using integrity as an issue, saying he would not be bossed by political warlords or bought by special interests.

But a confidential poll commissioned by Corzine last month shows more than half of New Jersey's voters question the first-term governor's integrity because of his relationship with ousted state-worker union leader Carla Katz.

More than half believe e-mails between Corzine's office and Katz should be released, and 49 percent say they "have lost confidence in Corzine because of the Katz controversy."

In an interview, the governor sought to downplay the findings of the opinion survey conducted by his longtime pollster, Doug Schoen, but said it is an important step as he plans a bid for re-election next year. The Star-Ledger obtained a section of the poll's summary pertaining to Katz.

"We need to be realistic about what are the concerns and considerations of the public," Corzine said. Corzine declined to go into a detailed discussion of the survey's findings, saying "Actually I spent very little time on this poll."

The governor said the poll was "quite constructive" because it offered a view of public opinion far broader than just on the issues relating to Katz, but he would not say what the survey found or which topics were tested.

Those familiar with the August survey said it included head-to-head comparisons of Corzine and other politicians, including U.S. Attorney Christopher Christie, the favored choice of Republican leaders to run against Corzine.

Corzine referred additional questions about the poll to his chief political strategist, Tom Shea, who said he would not "discuss any internal polling." Schoen did not return messages seeking comment. Katz declined comment, saying: "Governor Corzine has worked hard for the people of New Jersey and I am confident they will re-elect him."

Corzine, a divorced multi-millionaire, dated Katz for two years before he became governor. The romance ended with millions in gifts to Katz and led to questions about whether Katz's union members would receive special treatment from the administration.

Corzine has not fared well in recent independent polls: Quinnipiac University released a new survey on Wednesday showing half of the voters say Corzine does not deserve to be re-elected.

The concerns are more stark in Corzine's own poll. To gauge the impact of the Katz controversy, Corzine's pollster asked detailed questions about the public's view of his relationship with Katz, who was ousted in July as president of the largest state-worker union. The questions included references to allegations of financial improprieties against Katz by the Communications Workers of America, and noted that she is now the subject of a criminal investigation conducted by Christie's office. Overall, 58 percent said because of his dealings with Katz, they have questions about Corzine's integrity, compared with 27 percent who say he's done nothing wrong.

Corzine's long-standing effort to keep secret e-mails between himself, his staffers and Katz did not fare well with poll respondents: 54 percent said he should release the records, a number that grew to 59 percent when respondents were told that Katz was under investigation and had been ousted as president of CWA Local 1034. Corzine has been ordered to release the e-mails by a Superior Court judge and is appealing.

Polling expert Cliff Zukin said he was surprised to see the Katz controversy has registered so high with voters. "It is very rare that we see issues of integrity in government become first-tier issues," said Zukin, a Rutgers professor.

Republican consultant Carl Golden said he doubts Katz will wind up as a key issue on voters' minds next year.

"I just don't think it will have any serious impact on what Jon Corzine's future is," said Golden, who was communications director for two GOP governors. "I don't see it as an issue that is a turning point in the election."