

Downturn on the Home Front

Marquette Law School Poll Shows That Scott Walker's Supporters in Wisconsin Were Not Very Enthusiastic About His Presidential Bid

By Charles Franklin



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In November 2014, Scott Walker was reelected governor of Wisconsin, his third victory in four years. Four months later, Walker surged into first place in Iowa GOP presidential polling and was consistently in the top three in national Republican polling through early August. Yet by September 2015, his national poll numbers had fallen to 2 percent or less, and he suspended his presidential campaign on September 21, only the second of 17 candidates to do so. Returning to Wisconsin, Walker said he wanted to look forward to his next three years as governor and spend his time traveling the state promoting his ideas.

How did this sequence of electoral victory followed by national surge and subsequent collapse play out with the voters of Wisconsin? How did the national sequence of rise and fall compare with the trajectory in Wisconsin? The Marquette Law School Poll allows us to shed some light on this topic.

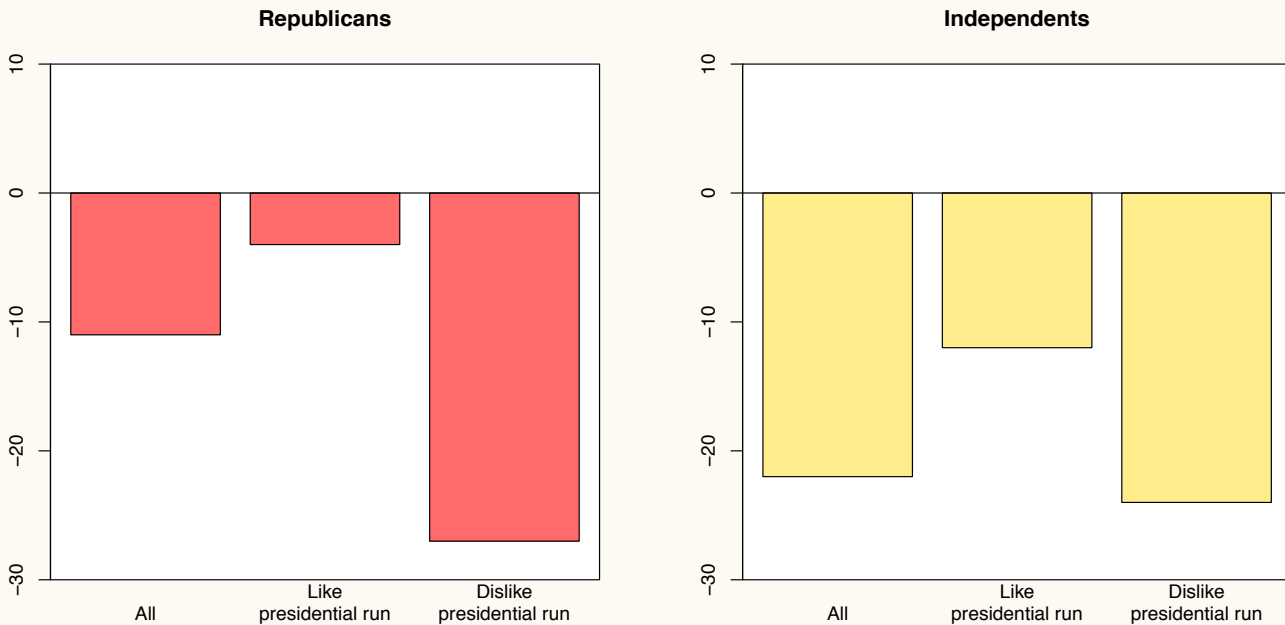
Walker as governor, 2012–2014

The 2014 campaign culminated in a third gubernatorial victory for Walker, with votes of 52 percent in 2010, 53 percent in the 2012 recall, and 52 percent in 2014. The consistent pattern of votes illustrates the polarized nature of Wisconsin politics detailed by Craig Gilbert, as Lubar Fellow for Public Policy Research, in the fall 2014 *Marquette Lawyer*. Voters in Wisconsin have been largely evenly divided and have exhibited little evidence of changing views of politics in recent years. The partisan divide has been especially clear. In 2010, Republicans gave Walker 95 percent of their votes while Democrats gave him just 9 percent of theirs. This very large gap nevertheless managed to widen in 2014, with 96 percent of Republicans and only 6 percent of Democrats voting for Walker.

This stability of support is further illustrated by data from the Marquette Law School Poll showing that, between January 2012 and October 2014, Walker's job approval never fell below 46 percent or rose above 52 percent. Likewise, disapproval of

his handling of his job as governor never fell below 42 percent or rose above 51 percent. The pooled surveys of 23,516 respondents put Walker's approval at 49.3 percent and disapproval at 46.2 percent. As with the gubernatorial elections, approval in the polls was sharply structured by partisanship: Republicans and independents who lean Republican (hereafter "Republicans") gave the governor an 88 percent approval rating and 10 percent disapproval in the pooled 2012–2014 surveys, while Democrats and independents who lean Democrat (hereafter "Democrats") provided 15 percent approval and 81 percent disapproval. During this period, Republicans made up 43 percent of registered voters while Democrats formed 47 percent. The pure independents, who lean toward neither party, comprised only 9 percent of the electorate but could swing the balance between the more numerous partisans. In this period, these pure independents gave Walker a 47 percent approval rating and 39 percent disapproval.

Change in Walker Approval as Governor, 2014–2015



Favorable views of Gov. Scott Walker have declined among both Republicans and independents in Wisconsin, but the declines have been stronger among those who didn't like Walker's running for president. These graphs show the percentage point declines in favorable opinions of Walker between fall 2014 (based on combined totals from four Marquette Law School Polls) and 2015 (based on three such polls). Favorability toward Walker among Democrats barely changed.

These data help explain how Walker managed to win three hard-fought elections by consistent, though narrow, margins: Partisans were intensely loyal in their votes and in their approval or disapproval of the governor, while independents were won to his side.

Level of support for Walker's presidential bid

Analyses of Walker's rise and fall as a presidential candidate have focused on statements he made, his poor performance in the first two debates among Republican candidates, and the way he ran his campaign. But analysis of the Marquette Law School Poll results, with a Wisconsin-only perspective, focuses on whether people supported the general idea of Walker's running for president.

As the likelihood of a Walker presidential bid loomed, Wisconsin voters were unsurprisingly divided in their views, but Republican voters were perhaps surprisingly tepid in their initial support for a run for the top office. When first asked in October 2013 if they would like to see Walker run for president, 30 percent of poll respondents said they would, while 66 percent said they would not. As expected,

only a handful (12 percent) of Democrats supported a presidential candidacy, but, more surprisingly, just 52 percent of Republicans favored such a national bid, while 43 percent opposed it. What about independents, who at the time gave Walker a 51–39 percent job approval rating? Only 24 percent favored a presidential effort, while 71 percent did not.

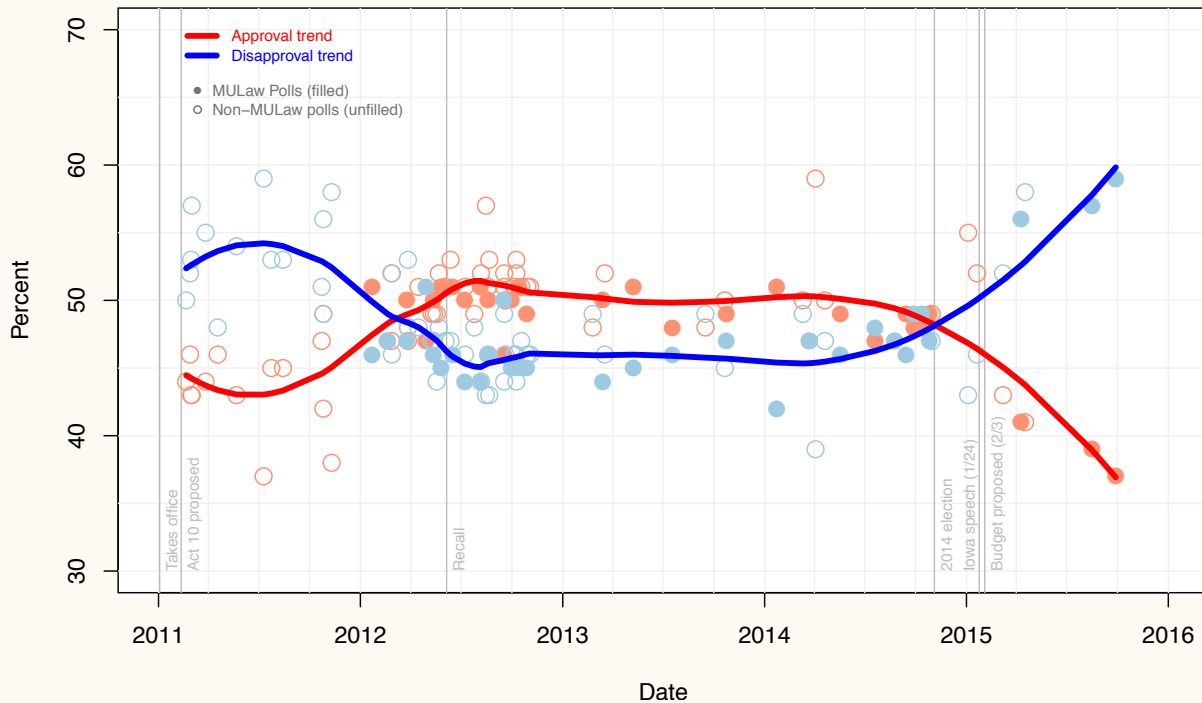
By comparison, at that time 39 percent favored a presidential race by U.S. Representative Paul Ryan, with 53 percent opposed, and among Republicans 64 percent favored a Ryan run, as did 34 percent of independents and 19 percent of Democrats.

Over the course of 2014 and 2015, there was a modest upturn in support for a Walker-for-president campaign. Between 26 and 31 percent supported a run in 2014, while 33 to 34 percent supported the effort in 2015. But among Republicans, support rose from an average of 49 percent in 2014 to 61 percent in 2015. Even in 2015, however, 35 percent of Republicans were not pleased by the presidential effort.

Independents presented the opposite trend. In 2014, 25 percent of independents liked the idea of a presidential race while 62 percent did not, but that slipped to 17 percent support and 73 percent opposition in all 2015 polling. ▶▶

Scott Walker Job Approval in Wisconsin

Every public poll. Latest: Sept. 28, 2015



Among these two groups, which had expressed strong support for Walker in his gubernatorial elections and in approval of his handling of his job as governor, support for the presidential bid was at best moderate—well below the levels of support shown in questions about approval of Walker as governor or whether people wanted to vote for him for that office. In the case of independents, the presidential run was solidly unpopular.

2015: Trouble on the home front

Reaction to Walker's much-reduced presence in Wisconsin in much of 2015 may have been a factor underlying downturns in support within the state for his candidacy. Wisconsin voters had reservations that any governor could run for president and also do the job of governor, with 30 percent saying this was possible, but 66 percent saying it was not. More telling perhaps is that among Republicans, while 48 percent said a governor could do both, 49 percent said this was not possible. Independents were even more dubious, with only 17 percent saying it was possible to do both. This skepticism set a significant bar for Walker to overcome in convincing voters he was continuing to devote his time to Wisconsin.

In April, during the difficult biennial state budget debate but while Walker was rising in national polls, the governor's job approval at home dropped sharply.

From a 49–47 percent approval split in late October 2014 (just before his reelection), his approval rating slipped to 41–56 in April and declined further to 39–57 in August and 37–59 in September (the last of these being after his withdrawal from the presidential campaign). The downturn was clearest among independents. In the combined four Marquette polls taken in September and October 2014, independents gave Walker a 43 percent approval and 44 percent disapproval rating. In the three 2015 polls combined, approval among independents fell to 21 percent, a drop of 22 points, while disapproval rose to 69 percent, an increase of 25 points. And among Republicans? In the two months before the 2014 election, approval of Walker stood at 89 percent with disapproval at 9 percent. This shifted to 78 percent approval and 19 percent disapproval in the three 2015 polls, a decline of 11 points in approval and an increase of 10 points in disapproval. Democrats changed little, from an 11–87 split in 2014 to 10–88 in 2015, a shift of just one point each way. Thus, most of the change in Walker's overall approval rating was driven by a sharp drop among independents and a significant drop among Republicans.

How did preferences about the presidential run affect these changing approval ratings? Among independents who supported a run for the presidency, approval as governor in 2014 stood at 61 percent, but in 2015 it had fallen to

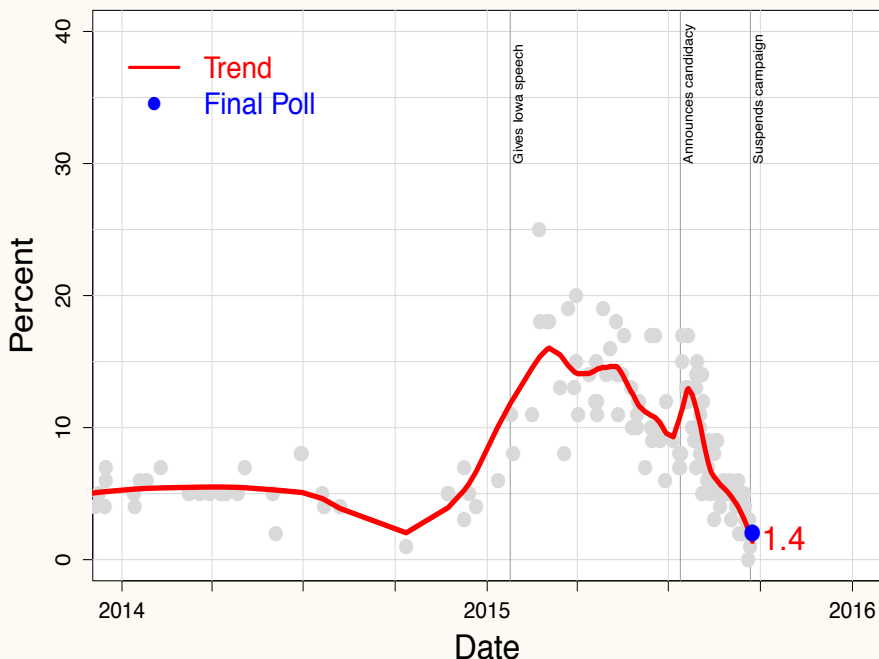
49 percent. That fall, among independents happy with the bid for higher office, is not attributable to dissatisfaction with the presidential race. Among those independents who did not want Walker to run for president, approval in 2014 was 38 percent, which fell to 14 percent in 2015. Thus, among independents pleased with the race, approval fell 12 points, while among those unhappy with the race it fell twice as much, 24 points.

Among Republicans pleased with the presidential bid, approval as governor in 2014 stood at 96 percent, with just 3 percent disapproving. In 2015, the same group gave a 92 percent approval and 6 percent disapproval, a fall of just 4 percent in approval. In contrast, among Republicans in 2014 who did not wish Walker to pursue the presidency, approval was at 81 percent and disapproval at 17 percent in 2014, falling in 2015 to 54 percent approval and 42 percent disapproval in 2015, a drop of 27 points in approval.

Thus the decline in approval of Walker's handling of his job as governor is seen among both independents and Republicans, but the decline is especially sharp among those in both groups who wished he had not sought the White House. By contrast, the decline was more modest among those pleased with the attempt at national office. Democrats, already extremely disapproving of Walker, played little role in the changes in approval seen in 2015.

Scott Walker in National Presidential Polls

Latest: Sept. 30, 2015



Looking forward

Where does this leave the outlook for the future? Walker's image and support have clearly suffered significant blows during 2015. As of late September, 37 percent approve of the job he is doing as governor, 34 percent are pleased that he ran for president, 35 percent say he cares about people like them, and 35 percent say they would like to see him run for a third term as governor in 2018. His support among Republicans is down while that among independents is down dramatically.

But Walker has been down in Wisconsin polling before. While the Marquette Law School Poll did not begin until January 2012, in 2011 there were 14 statewide polls by a mix of academic, independent, and partisan pollsters. During that most tumultuous year, Walker's approval averaged 44 percent while his disapproval averaged 53 percent. Two polls then put his approval at 37 and 38 percent, equaling his current low marks in the Marquette polls of 2015. Yet in 2012, during and after the recall campaign, Walker's approval rose to an average of 50 percent, with disapproval averaging 46 percent (the averages are the same whether looking at all public polls or at Marquette polls alone in 2012).

While Walker's average support in 2011 did not fall as far as his 2015 lows, his 2012 recovery demonstrates that it is possible to win voters back, at least enough to secure an electoral majority. In 2015, the losses of support are significant among Republicans, a group likely to respond positively to efforts by Walker to win back their loyalty. Among independents, the challenge is greater, with a larger fall in support and without the partisan affinity of GOP partisans. But with more than three years remaining in his term, Walker has time to attempt a recovery of public support. How well that plays out is not something the current polling data can answer. ■

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