

Slightly fewer voters voice approval of Abercrombie

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Gov. Neil Abercrombie's job approval rating has slipped as his administration struggles to find footing after nearly two years in power.

Forty-one percent of voters in a new Hawaii Poll approve of Abercrombie's job performance, down from 43 percent in July. The Democratic governor has not been over 50 percent in any of the four surveys taken since he took control of Washington Place in December 2010.

Just 51 percent of voters who usually vote Democratic approve of Abercrombie's performance, the same as in July, while 39 percent of union households give the governor a positive rating, up slightly from July.

President Barack Obama's job approval rating in Hawaii is 68 percent, the poll found. In contrast to Abercrombie, the Hawaii-born Democrat received high marks among traditional Democrats and union households, the party's political base. Eighty-nine percent of Democrats approve of the president's performance, while 75 percent of union voters do.

"While we appear to have turned the economic corner, the governor continues to make the tough decisions to maintain a solid fiscal position, including sacrifices by state workers," Blake Oshiro, Abercrombie's deputy chief of staff, said in an email. "But, we have experienced a rise in job employment numbers partly due to the fact that the governor continues to initiate (capital improvement) projects across the state. Taxpayers also received their refunds in a timely manner and we are paying our bills with only minimal delay.

"While the changes that are occurring may not appear drastic, important New Day initiatives are moving forward and the governor deserves credit for his unwavering commitment to doing what's right for all people," Oshiro said.

Dan Boylan, a political analyst and professor emeritus of history at the University of Hawaii-West Oahu, said he believes Abercrombie's low job approval ratings are linked to actions he took to help the state get through the recession. Boylan said former Gov. Linda Lingle's job approval ratings also declined during the recession.

The state's financial outlook has improved as the economy recovers.

"The economy is improving. I think that's going to mean better numbers for him in the next couple years, assuming that it continues to improve," said Boylan, who is also a MidWeek columnist.

Boylan, like other political analysts, said Abercrombie still has a tendency to self-inflict damage with often rash public statements.

"I think he's got to watch what he says. He's been awfully blunt and caused a lot of his own trouble, I think,

in that first year in office in particular," he said. "He's been quieter since and his numbers have gone up."

The Hawaii Poll was taken by Ward Research for the Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now between Oct. 15 and 22. The interviews were conducted with 786 likely voters statewide on land lines and cellphones. The margin of error is 3.5 percentage points.

Several state House and Senate leaders have praised the work of Oshiro and Bruce Coppa, Abercrombie's chief of staff, for stabilizing the administration after a staff shake-up and other turmoil during a difficult first year.

House Minority Leader Gene Ward (R, Kalama Valley-Hawaii Kai) said Abercrombie is under more public scrutiny as governor than he was as a congressman for two decades in Washington, D.C.

"We're kind of in a fishbowl in the political arena, and he's getting the strict scrutiny," Ward said. "That doesn't say he can't pull out of that, but it says, 'Hey, there's some feedback that he probably needs to pay serious attention to.'"

In addition to the soft ratings among traditional Democrats and union voters, Abercrombie has also alienated environmentalists and progressives because of his support for fast-tracking state development projects to help economic recovery.

State Rep. Cynthia Thielen (R, Kailua-Kaneohe), a leading voice on environmental protection, said Abercrombie has not provided adequate vision, particularly on issues such as renewable energy.

"So I think maybe people are discouraged," she said.

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