



TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Brock McCleary, Harper Polling
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RE: Key Poll Findings – Kentucky Governor General Election Poll

Our survey of likely voters in Kentucky reveal what is likely to be a hotly contested race for the Governor's office this November. Two Republican candidates initially lead Democrat Jack Conway in hypothetical ballot tests (James Comer and Hal Heiner), while two trail him (Will Scott and Matt Bevin). All general election matchups are within the Margin of Error to start, while the GOP has a small lead on the generic ballot.

Election Environment

Fifty-two percent of Kentuckians say things in Kentucky are on the wrong track, compared to 38% who say things are heading in the right direction. Democrats say things are going in the right direction at a rate of 49-41% while Republicans (33% right direction, 60% wrong track) and Independents (30% right direction, 62% wrong track) say wrong track.

Economy and Jobs (45%) tops the list as the most important issue in determining a vote for Governor this November followed by education and schools (16%) and Obamacare and KYNECT (16%). Tax reform, spending and debt issues was the most important to 13% of those surveyed with roads and bridges at 5%. After economy and jobs, women were more concerned about education (20%) and Obamacare (20%) while men were concerned about tax reform, spending and debt issues (18%).

Voters in Kentucky would prefer to vote for a Republican for Governor (48%) over a Democrat (43%). Independents break for Republicans (44-31%) while Moderates would choose a Democrat (63-26%).

Candidate Images

Of all of the candidates for Governor, state Agriculture Commissioner James Comer has the strongest image, with a favorability margin of +25% (45% favorable, 20% unfavorable). Comer earns the warmest initial reception from Republicans at 59% favorable to 11% unfavorable. He is also viewed favorably by Independents (41% favorable to 26% unfavorable) and Moderates (39% favorable to 28% unfavorable).

All of the Republicans have positive images with former Louisville Metro Councilman Hal Heiner at net favorability of +5%, former state supreme Court Justice Will Scott at +3% and Businessman Matt Bevin at +3%. Scott is the least well known with 45% of voters not sure about him. Not surprisingly, Heiner's image is the strongest in the Louisville media market at 52% favorable to 27% unfavorable.

Democratic Attorney General Jack Conway has the strongest hard name identification (81% have some opinion of him). His image stands at 46% favorable to 35% unfavorable. He earns a 61% favorable rating among Democrats (22% unfavorable) and Moderates (27% unfavorable). In contrast, retired engineer Geoff Young (D) is unknown to the Kentucky electorate at 56% not sure. His image stands at 22% favorable to 22% unfavorable.

General Election Head to Head Ballots

James Comer leads Jack Conway 45-41% in a head-to-head matchup. Comer leads in the Louisville media market (48-41%) while Conway leads in the Lexington media market (48-42%). Comer has stronger support from Republicans (79%) than Conway does from Democrats (63%). While Comer leads among Independents (45-29%), Conway holds a strong advantage among Moderates (59-32%).

Hal Heiner also leads Conway, albeit by a smaller margin at 44-42%. Voters treat Heiner similarly to Comer, as he garners solid support from Republicans (79%), leads among Independents (45-35%) and trails among Moderates (31-58%). The pattern continues regionally, with Heiner leading in the Louisville market (50-42%) and trailing in the Lexington market (35-51%).

Jack Conway leads Will Scott in a hypothetical head-to-head, 44-40%. Conway leads Scott in both major regions (Louisville: 46-43%, Lexington: 50-31%). Conway's support is heavily concentrated in those aged 66 or older, among whom he leads 57-30%. However, Scott leads Conway in all other age groups (18-39: 41-38%, 40-54: 47-38%, 55-65: 42-39%). Scott gets 74% of Republican support compared to just 67% for Conway from Democrats.

Matt Bevin also trails Jack Conway, 45-41%. Conway has a significant advantage among women, at 52-32% while Bevin leads among men (50-39%).

Tea party supporters give their strongest initial support in the head-to-head matchups to James Comer (84%) followed by Hal Heiner (80%), Matt Bevin (77%) and Will Scott (75%). Conservative voters are equally enthusiastic in their support of Comer (73%) and Heiner (73%), followed by Bevin (68%) and Scott (67%).

Summary

In the head-to-head ballot tests, all Republican candidates earn stronger support from their own party than Jack Conway receives from Democrats; this also happened in the U.S. Senate race in 2014, in which exit polling showed Mitch McConnell getting more Republican votes than Alison Grimes earned Democratic votes.

It is all-but-certain that Jack Conway will seek to tie himself to incumbent, term-limited Governor Steve Beshear, as he enjoys a strong job approval (50% approve vs. just 31% who disapprove). On the other hand, Republicans will again make an issue of President Barack Obama as they did in 2014, as his historically dismal job approval rating in Kentucky continues (32% approve vs. 59% disapprove).

James Comer has the strongest initial lead over Jack Conway at +4%, while Heiner leads Conway by 2%. Both Scott and Bevin initially trail Conway by 4%. All matchups indicate a close race to become Kentucky's next Governor.

METHODOLOGY:

The sample size for the survey is 640 likely voters and the margin of error is +/-3.87%. The Interactive Voice Response (IVR) automated telephone survey was conducted January 28–29, 2015 by Harper Polling. The total percentages for responses may not equal 100% due to rounding.