POLITICS

Governors' Long Honeymoon of COVID Approval Ratings Is Coming to an End

BY DARRAGH ROCHE ON 3/10/21 AT 7:52 AM EST

A Timeline Of The COVID-19 Pandemic In 2020

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With the pandemic ending more than 500,000 American lives so far, the results for their political fortunes, just like their COVID plans, have been mixed. But, broadly, voter approval was more buoyant for those who took a stricter line on public health. That is changing over time.

U.S. governors of either party who acted decisively against the threat of COVID-19 generally enjoyed healthier approval ratings than those whose reaction to the pandemic was softer or belated, a *Newsweek* analysis has found.

But those polling bounces from handling the virus have been eroded over the course of the pandemic, and many governors have seen a substantial drop from their approval rating peaks last spring.

The pandemic gave America's governors a unique opportunity to show leadership in a time of national crisis. While some focused on public health, taking drastic action such as shuttering businesses and imposing stay-at-home orders, others put emphasis on maintaining personal liberty.

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However, these falls may not be politically significant, particularly where gubernatorial elections are heavily weighted in favor of one party.

While most Democrats have benefited politically—with some unpopular incumbents gaining unexpected ground—the effect had started to peter out by the end of 2020.

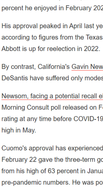
Republican governors in blue states seem to be the biggest winners, securing high levels of support and maintaining them better than Democrats.

There are 48 serving governors who were in office when the pandemic began. Of those, 25 have seen their approval ratings rise or been reelected during the crisis, while 13 have experienced declines. For the remaining 10, the picture is more complex.

Some governors who were already unpopular, such as Oklahoma's Kevin Stitt, a Republican, and Hawaii's David Ige, a Democrat, failed to alter their standing.

Others in the same position—notably Rhode Island's Gina Raimondo, a Democrat—saw substantial improvements.

And a handful has defied the general trend, with Florida's Ron DeSantis, a Republican, and Illinois' JB Pritzker, a Democrat, standing out as leaders whose approval has ebbed and flowed throughout the pandemic.



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Eighteen governors either took a relatively relaxed approach to the virus, initially resisted implementing public health measures introduced by other states, or moved quickly to lift restrictions. Some did decide to impose tight restrictions, others did not.

Of these governors, 13 have seen their approval ratings fall or remain poor, while one was reelected last year.

The remaining 30 governors adopted moderate to strict restrictions, often including stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, and widespread business closures. This group of governors was generally more willing to impose stringent public health measures and to do so sooner.

Nineteen either improved their approval rating or saw little change and three were reelected.

It is worth noting that COVID-19 restrictions have changed over time as governors have altered course, sometimes introducing new restrictions they previously opposed, sometimes bowing to pressure to reopen businesses.

The governors of the four most populous states—California, New York, Texas, and Florida—have seen falls in their approval ratings over the past year, but Abbott stands out.

A University of Houston Hobby School of Public Affairs poll published on February 5 showed Abbott with just 39 percent approval. This is a significant decline from the 48 percent he enjoyed in February 2020.

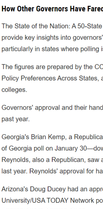
His approval peaked in April last year at 56 percent but began to decline into the fall, according to figures from the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin. Abbott is up for reelection in 2022.

By contrast, California's Gavin Newsom, New York's Andrew Cuomo, and Florida's Ron DeSantis have suffered only modest declines in support when compared to last year.

Newsom, facing a potential recall election, enjoys 51 percent approval, according to a Morning Consult poll released on February 4. This is higher than Newsom's approval rating at any time before COVID-19 struck but it's a 16-point drop from his mid-pandemic high in May.

Cuomo's approval has experienced a similar effect. A Morning Consult poll published on February 22 gave the three-term governor an approval rating of 57 percent. This is down from his high of 63 percent in January and earlier in February, but still higher than his pre-pandemic numbers. He was polling at just 47 percent at the end of 2019.

However, Cuomo is now engulfed in scandals relating to the reporting of nursing home deaths in New York and sexual harassment allegations, which may begin dragging his approval down further and faster as more recent polling emerges.



New York Governor Andrew Cuomo speaks during a press conference before the opening of a mass COVID-19 vaccination site in the Queens borough of New York, on February 24, 2021.
SETH WENIG/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

In Florida, DeSantis, who was once considered one of the country's most popular governors, saw a severe decline in approval during the pandemic, but he's recently recovered, recording 54 percent in a Florida Chamber of Commerce of poll published on January 29. This is up from a low of 43 percent in a Florida Atlantic University poll in September.

Unlike Cuomo and Newsom, DeSantis pushed hard for reopening the economy in Florida and faced criticism for the decision. But the Republican doesn't appear to have suffered any long-term political damage from the approach.

The experience of these four states speaks to the wider trend all across the country: The pandemic has impacted governors differently and approval ratings have been affected by how they approached the virus.

Democrats and Republican governors in blue states appear to have benefited the most from their approach to the crisis, while Republicans in deep-red states have largely suffered if they did not take strong action against the virus.

Phil Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat, is the only governor up for reelection in 2021. His response to COVID-19 has boosted his chances, with polls showing him at a 60 percent approval rating, Politico reported. Murphy's approval rating in February, 2020 was just 41 percent, according to a Fairleigh Dickinson University survey.

Murphy isn't the only governor to experience a startling increase in his approval but many of his Democratic colleagues have found the effect fleeting, while some previously popular governors have seen their approval rating decline, often in sharp terms.

Alabama's Kay Ivey, a Republican, had consistently been one of the country's most popular leaders, enjoying 63 percent support in an NBC/Survey Monkey poll in July, 2019.

That rating had fallen to just 48 percent the following year, according to a survey by researchers at Harvard, Rutgers, Northwestern and Northeastern Universities.

How Other Governors Have Fared

The State of the Nation: A 50-State COVID-19 Survey's executive approval updates provide key insights into governors' ratings in relation to their handling of COVID-19, particularly in states where polling is infrequent.

The figures are prepared by the COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States, an academic-led project involving several leading colleges.

Governors' approval and their handling of the pandemic have been closely linked for the past year.

Georgia's Brian Kemp, a Republican, had an approval rating of 42 percent in a University of Georgia poll on January 30—down from 53 percent—and Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, also a Republican, saw a decline from 52 percent to just 37 percent by July last year. Reynolds' approval for handling had improved by October, rising to 42 percent.

Arizona's Doug Ducey had an approval rating of just 35 percent in an October Suffolk University/USA TODAY Network poll, down from 59 percent at the start of June per Arizona Public Opinion Pulse.

Like Newsom, Ducey is facing a recall effort. The GOP-led state legislature is also trying to strip Ducey, a Republican, of his emergency powers because of his decision to issue executive orders closing or restricting businesses during the pandemic.

Ivey, Kemp, Reynolds and Ducey had previously been critical of COVID-19 shutdowns in their states. Republican governors who took a more proactive approach appear to have benefited in polling.

Larry Hogan of Maryland, Phil Scott of Vermont and Charlie Baker of Massachusetts—all popular Republican governors—have maintained high approval ratings. Their approach to the pandemic was more aggressive than others in the GOP.

The November edition of the COVID-19 Consortium's executive approval update found that all three enjoyed approval ratings over 65 percent. Hogan's approval stood at 73 percent on October 27, according to a Gonzales poll.

Scott won 55 percent approval in a VPR-Vermont PBS poll on September 22 and Baker currently enjoys 74 percent approval, according to a MassINC Polling survey released on February 22. Scott won a third term in November with more than 68 percent of the vote.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, both Republicans who took an aggressive approach to the virus, continue to enjoy widespread support. A Spectrum News/Ipsos poll released on October 21 showed DeWine with a 67 percent overall approval rating, while Sununu won reelection last year with just over 65 percent.

Virginia's Ralph Northam and Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer are both Democrats leading what are traditionally seen as swing states, though Virginia hasn't voted for a Republican in a presidential election since 2004. They've improved their standing since the pandemic began.

Northam's approval was up to 56 percent from last year's 49 percent, according to a Washington Post-Schar School poll published on October 23.

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