Economy, budget cuts turn voters away from Florida governor, poll says

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After five months on the job, Gov. Rick Scott's popularity is sinking and voters don't like the $69.7 billion state spending plan awaiting his signature today, a new poll found.

The Quinnipiac University poll released Wednesday found voters' disapproval of the way Scott is doing his job climbed to 57 percent, up from 48 just a month ago, compared to 29 percent who approved.

And more than half of voters polled -- 54 percent -- believe the state budget is unfair to people like them, while 29 percent think it is fair.

Even fellow Republicans are less than enthusiastic about Scott, pollster Peter Brown found, with just 51 percent of GOP voters approving and 37 percent disapproving of Scott's job performance.

"These are not good numbers. There's no way to spin these numbers," Brown told reporters Wednesday morning.

Scott's disapproval rating, the highest among governors of the seven states the university polls, has more than doubled since February.

The survey of 1,196 registered voters from May 17-23 found dissatisfaction wasn't limited to Scott. They also disapproved of the legislature by a nearly identical 56-27 margin.

Scott rode into office on a tea party wave in November but garnered less than 50 percent of the votes and barely defeated Democrat Alex Sink by 1 percentage point.

But Scott, who makes frequent appearances on conservative radio talk shows and FoxNews, has not made an effort to broaden support, Florida Atlantic University political science professor Kevin Wagner said.

"Once most politicians get into office, they spend a fair amount of time trying to appeal to those voters who didn't vote for them, to improve their image," Wagner said. "Scott has never even really tried any of that. He's made a specific effort to appeal to his core constituencies, the tea party, so it's not terribly surprising his numbers haven't improved."

Scott, who rolled out his budget at a tea party rally in February, will sign the spending plan into law Thursday in The Villages, again surrounded by tea party supporters.
In an interview Wednesday with WQAM, a sports-talk radio station in Miami, Scott suggested the steps he's taken to deal with the budget crisis are partly to blame for the poor numbers.

"When you go make all the tough decisions, when you walk into a budget deficit of $3.7 billion and you hold people accountable, you make sure that education's headed in the right direction, you make sure that you're getting the jobs back -- it takes time for those things to happen," Scott said. "We're on the right track, the right things are going to happen."

Florida's voters are reflecting national anxiety about joblessness and the economy as food and gas prices continue to climb, said University of South Florida political science professor Susan MacManus.

"People are in general frustrated with politicians. It looks like there's nothing being done except make promises. So when someone makes big promises like 700,000 jobs and it isn't done, the result is what you see with the poll numbers," she said.

Voters are also unhappy about the state budget, which did not raise taxes but slashes nearly $4 billion from education, health care and other services. And it cuts more than 4,500 jobs and forces state workers to contribute 3 percent of their salaries toward their pensions.

Voters by a 54-29 percent margin said the new budget was not fair to them, while 16 percent did not offer an opinion.

On another critical issue, 63 percent of the voters said property insurance is getting harder to obtain, while only 3 percent said it is getting easier. And nearly three-quarters -- 74 percent -- said property insurance is getting more expensive.

Scott signed a new industry-backed insurance law that will allow companies to hike rates by as much as 15 percent and do away with some of the regulations approved by lawmakers under Gov. Charlie Crist.

"Whether the new law changes public attitudes about insurance in Florida, only time will tell, but there is no doubt that the electorate sees a crying need for something to make getting and paying for property insurance in Florida less onerous," said Brown.

The News Service of Florida contributed to this story.