Focused on Jobs, Rick Scott's Work Generates Low Poll Numbers

By: Kenric Ward | Posted: December 13, 2011 3:55 AM

Rick Scott isn't the only freshman Southeastern governor with horrid poll numbers. But after nearly a year in office, that's small solace for Florida's chief executive.

In what may be the most surprising fall from gubernatorial grace, South Carolina Republican Gov. Nikki Haley's approval rating has plummeted into the mid-30 percent range.

Meantime, North Carolina Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue lags 10 points behind her GOP rival in the run-up to the 2012 election.

Citing a new Public Policy Polling survey, Dean Pagani of Governors Journal likened Scott's 26 percent approval rate to "Nixon territory -- as in Richard Nixon at the end of his presidency."

"It makes Scott the least popular governor of all those surveyed by PPP, and probably the least popular in the country," he said.

Equally sobering, Pagani noted, was a new Winthrop University poll pegging Haley's approval rating at 34.6 percent. That's alarmingly low, considering she won office handily last year in the staunchly Republican Palmetto State.

"Her low approval ratings stand in direct contrast to the perception of her outside South Carolina. She came to office on the cover of Newsweek magazine and challenging President Obama on health care at her first White House meeting. She often appears on national television as a reliable Obama critic and she has traveled to other states as a popular speaker at GOP events," Pagani said.

In North Carolina, Perdue is struggling with a 37 percent approval rating in the latest PPP survey. The first-term governor continues to trail her likely opponent in next year's re-election campaign by 10 points, Pagani reported.

All three Southern governors seem to be paying a price for their states' double-digit unemployment rates that exceed the national average. But other factors figure in as
Haley has been dogged by staff problems since taking office, and the recent indictment of three Perdue election workers on campaign finance charges has cast a cloud over the Democrat's re-election bid. With enough problems of her own, Perdue has yet to say whether she will appear with the increasingly unpopular Obama when he visits Fort Bragg on Wednesday.

Scott's poll woes appear to be more policy-driven, political scientists tell Sunshine State News. A year after he defeated Democrat Alex Sink, Scott's agenda remains both enigmatic and polarizing, they say.

"He was not that popular to begin with and won only a slim majority to get elected. He has tried to portray a kinder, gentler image and get more in tune with the state over the past several months, but it has had very little effect," said Sean Foreman, political science professor at Barry University in Miami Shores.

"He is generally disliked by many people who can’t get over his checkered background and the legal troubles his companies have had."

Seth McKee, a political science professor at University of South Florida St. Petersburg, noted that Scott, a novice politician, hit the ground stumbling.

"Not long after he was sworn in, Scott behaved in a manner that drew broad opposition, with nixing high-speed light rail between Tampa and Orlando as the most prominent case.

"He drew bipartisan ire in refusing federal funds for this project, and then turned around and supported a smaller project [SunRail] in the Orlando area," McKee recounted.

Listing two challenging areas of public policy, McKee said, "It doesn't appear, especially from public opinion polls, that Scott is getting better at being governor the longer he's been in the job."

"One, you can't simply change the terms of the promise you made with respect to how many jobs will be created during your administration when that's the most important issue to voters.

"Two, it is hard for voters to trust a governor who originally pushes a budget that guts education and then most recently realizes that education is one part of the budget that must be protected.

"Quite frankly, Scott's about-faces make one question his competency and leadership," McKee concluded.

Lane Wright, Scott's press secretary, said the governor's "top priority is helping this
state create jobs. That's his main focus -- not polls."

"He campaigned on creating 700,000 in seven years, regardless of whether the economy improves or gets worse. Those terms haven't changed."

Wright added:

"In the months and years leading up to him taking office, Florida was losing jobs. Normal growth at that time was negative. Since Governor Scott took office, Florida has created more than 106,000 jobs and watched our unemployment rate drop from 12 percent down to 10.3 percent.

"During that same period, the national unemployment rate has remained essentially flat going from 9.1 percent to 9 percent. Those facts can't be argued."

Wright said it is "a mistake" to suggest that Scott has only recently taken an interest in public schools.

"Education, and making sure we have a work force that can compete, is a big part of creating jobs in this state. That's why Governor Scott made the Student Success Act the first bill he signed. He also pushed for expanding school choice for parents and students."

As for rail issues, Wright said Scott vetoed the $2.4 billion high-speed train project "because it was a federal boondoggle that would have put Florida on the hook for billions for years to come."

"While he wasn't thrilled about SunRail, he recognized that project was different since local governments and private entities had made firm commitments and pledged support for the project. They preferred to use available funding for SunRail instead of other transportation projects in that area.

"What's more, prior elected officials had established a legal structure for it over decades that made it virtually impossible to stop," Wright concluded.

Doug Guetzloe, a conservative political operative and lifelong Republican who supported Scott in 2010 while consulting for the Florida TEA Party, affirmed, "Polls show a snapshot of great voter unrest. Whether that voter unrest manifests itself into removing current governors next time around remains to be seen."

"Rick Scott is incapable of improving his polling; however, he is capable of winning re-election, depending on the campaign and the opponents," predicted Guetzloe, an anti-tax activist who disagreed with the governor's approval of SunRail.

Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, theorized that Scott may have been burned by his ties to the tea movement in a swing state where
Democratic voters outnumber Republicans.

"He spent much of his early months in office appealing to the tea party. While that is an important group inside the GOP, there was a widely held perception that he was not looking out for other Floridians," Wagner observed.

Still, with three years remaining on his inaugural term in office, Scott need not abandon hope, Foreman says.

"The saving grace for Scott is that the Florida Legislature is even less popular than the governor," the Barry professor said, referencing other polls.

Indeed, Democratic President Obama may be in more immediately dire straits here.

A poll by Hamilton Campaigns and Ayres McHenry & Associates reported Monday that 44 percent of Floridians surveyed view Obama in a favorable light, compared with a 39 percent favorable rating for Scott.

Neither number is very good, but the president's number is up in less than 11 months.