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Perry marks milestone as poll shows problems

He has served most consecutive days in office, but trails Hutchison as a potential foe

By PEGGY FIKAC
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Texas Gov. Rick Perry

Harry Cabluck AP

AUSTIN — As Gov. Rick Perry today hits a milestone — becoming the Texas governor to serve the most consecutive days in office — a new poll shows him trailing GOP U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison among Texans looking toward the 2010 governor's race.

Robert Black, spokesman for the Republican governor, dismissed the Texas Lyceum Poll results, saying, "Any poll that tries to forecast any kind of results two years from an election

isn't worth a whole lot."

He attributed criticism to Perry taking a leadership stand on tough issues ranging from transportation to taxes.

"It's the person who has never done anything who is always most popular. Leadership isn't a popularity contest," Black said Friday, as Perry marked his 2,745th day in office, tying the record of former Democratic Gov. Allan Shivers as second-longest serving Texas governor and the one to serve the most consecutive days.

Former GOP Gov. Bill Clements, who served two non-consecutive terms, still is the all-time, longest-serving Texas governor at 2,919 days in office. Perry is due to overtake him in December.

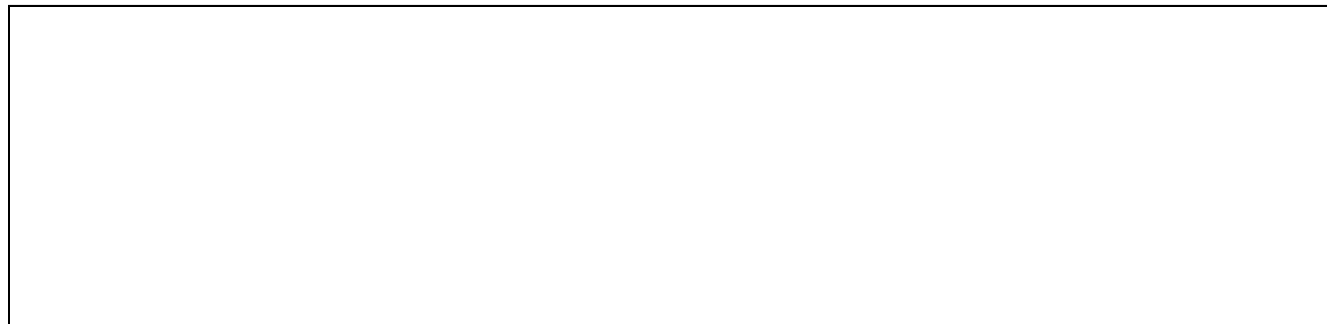
Perry has said he wants to continue his streak by winning another term in 2010, but the poll for the non-profit Texas Lyceum group gave a strong advantage to Hutchison, who's expected to run for governor.

Difficult to be governor

Among all respondents, 35 percent said they were likely to support Hutchison in a GOP contest, and 22 percent backed Perry, with other possible candidates dividing the rest. Among a subgroup of GOP voters, Hutchison drew 50 percent to 23 percent for Perry.

The poll shows "how difficult it is to be a governor," said Daron Shaw, poll director and associate professor in the government department at the University of Texas at Austin.

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"Perry has to take lots of positions and get out in front on public policy issues. Senators can be a little more selective."

The poll of 1,000 Texans has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Sen. Leticia Van de Putte of San Antonio, head of the state Senate Democratic Caucus, said Hutchison is "very well thought of in my community" but was hard-pressed to come up with a Perry accomplishment.

"What can you say?" she said. "He's still good-looking. I think he's one of the cutest governors."

Van de Putte bemoaned actions including 2003 budget cutbacks that she and other advocates of public services say still are being felt today in areas including children's insurance, despite work to restore funding.

Perry has partly credited Texas' relatively favorable economy with leaders' decision to bridge that legislative session's \$10 billion budget shortfall without new taxes. Perry also has made his mark with efforts including a package that cut local school property tax rates while expanding the state business tax, a levy many companies bemoan; lawsuit reform; and championing the controversial Trans-Texas Corridor plan.

"Governor Perry's public service has been exemplary and unique," House Speaker Tom Craddick said in a written statement.

Rep. Jim Keffer, an Eastland Republican who

heads the House Ways and Means Committee and has butted heads with Perry on some tax issues, cited lawsuit reform as Perry's biggest accomplishment. He cited as a problem the handling of the Trans-Texas Corridor, which inflamed people over its potential path and toll roads.

"I certainly don't agree with all the directions he's gone, but still ... he is trying to do his best for Texas, and I congratulate him for it," Keffer said.

Political scientist Bruce Buchanan of the University of Texas at Austin, noting Perry's 2006 re-election with 39 percent of the vote over four opponents, said of Perry's priorities, "None of those initiatives has struck a strong chord in the hearts and minds of Texans, if we're to judge by the tepid support he got in his re-election race. . . It seems to me like he'd better hope Kay Bailey Hutchison has a change of heart or gets invited to be vice president."

Chronicle reporter R.G. Ratcliffe contributed to this report.

peggy.fikac@chron.com

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