

93 percent in US think economy in bad shape

Polls reveal disappointment, dissatisfaction with Obama

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18 December 2009

The growing dissatisfaction of the American population with Barack Obama, whose victory a little over a year ago was greeted with genuine enthusiasm, is registered in numerous recent polls and surveys of public opinion. Rarely has the electorate undergone such a shift in political mood in so short a space of time.

The approval rating for Obama varies from poll to poll, but the general tendency is sharply downward. A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll found that for the first time since January 2009 less than half the US population “approved of the job President Barack Obama was doing.” Both an ABC News/*Washington Post* and a CBS News/*New York Times* survey indicated 50 percent of respondents supporting the president’s efforts, while an Associated Press-GfK poll revealed 56 percent approval for Obama.

The bipartisan Battleground Poll, sponsored by George Washington University in Washington, DC, reported that favorable opinion of Obama had slipped to 49 percent. “What a difference a year makes,” Christopher Arterton, dean of the graduate school of political management at GWU, told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Moreover, the *Wall Street Journal*, covering its own survey, took note of the fact that “public displeasure with Democrats wasn’t translating directly into warmth for the Republicans.” Only 28 percent of respondents had positive things to say about the Republicans, and a mere 5 percent expressed “very positive” sentiments; only 10 percent felt “very positively” about the Democrats.

The Battleground Poll reported 68 percent disapproval of Congress, “an all-time high,” with 77 percent of independent voters displeased. Its authors suggested that the findings were ominous for the Democrats in 2010 because Obama’s “most passionate supporters...appear

less likely to turn out to vote in congressional elections next year. And the most angry of the independent voters...appear heavily motivated to vote against Democrats.”

While the findings of the various pollsters are not uniform, nor are the respondents politically clarified in large numbers, the general unease and discontent of wide layers of people, especially after they took considerable pains over the course of several elections to remove the Republicans as majority party in Congress and from the White House, is palpable.

The polls find the strongest opinions and thus the highest numbers, not surprisingly, in regard to individuals’ experience of the current economic crisis. For example, 84 percent of those responding to the recent ABC/*Post* survey declared that jobs were hard to find in their community (a jump of 36 points in little more than two years), the worst such figure since 1992. According to the same poll, 86 percent of the population say that from their perspective the recession is not over.

In separate research, the ABC News Consumer Comfort Index “is wrapping up what will be the worst year in 24 years of weekly polls. This week 93 percent of Americans say the national economy is in bad shape” (ABC News, December 16, 2009).

The various polls all found that a majority of Americans think the country is in long-term decline. The *Journal*/NBC, Battleground, and AP-GfK surveys indicated that 33, 34, and 46 percent of the respondents, respectively, thought the nation was headed in the right direction, an improvement over the last dismal days of the Bush administration, but down from the first weeks of Obama’s presidency.

Only a third of those questioned by the *Journal*/NBC pollsters have confidence that Obama has the right goals

and priorities to improve the economy, and a remarkable two-thirds are not confident that life for their children's generation will be better than it was for them. Democratic pollster Peter D. Hart, who helped conduct the *Journal/NBC* survey, commented, "All of this says that optimism has crashed through the floor board."

The harsh economic reality and the government's refusal to take any steps to alleviate widespread social misery, along with Obama's obvious personal indifference to the situation, are probably the most prominent factors driving the drop in the new administration's popularity. This is only hinted at by the pollsters, who shy away from posing the obvious, but politically sensitive, questions that it would be interesting to see answered by the "man on the street"—for example, "How do you feel about trillions of dollars being set aside for the banks when the working population is suffering from layoffs, wage cuts, foreclosures and other economic woes?"

Nonetheless, the *Journal*, in its piece reporting the poll findings, felt obliged to cite the comments of Julie Edwards, a 52-year-old aircraft technician in Mesa, Arizona, who voted for the Democrats in the past two elections, "but wasn't sure how she would vote next time. She wondered why Wall Street firms were bailed out when average Americans needed help. 'We can bail out Wall Street, but everybody else has to suffer in spades for it,' she said."

The recent polls are split over the degree of popular support for the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, although each indicates that opposition remains large and stubborn, and suspicion is even more widespread.

Certain surveys indicate that the government and media blitz over US escalation has had an impact. The *Journal/NBC* poll, for example, found 55 percent in support of increasing US troop levels, an 8 percent jump since October.

However, noted NBC News on its Web site, "the public remains skeptical about the eventual outcome in Afghanistan." According to the *Journal/NBC* poll, "58 percent are less confident that the war there will come to a successful conclusion," and "only 39 percent believe that US troops will begin to withdraw...by Obama's stated goal of July 2011." Republican pollster Bill McInturff commented on the Afghan poll numbers, "The way to characterize this data is 'watchful waiting'.... People are kind of waiting to see what's going to happen."

The ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found that 52 percent of those responding to its questions (down from

56 percent at the end of March, but up from 44 percent in mid-November) felt the Afghanistan war had been worth fighting, with 44 percent feeling that it was not, and 35 percent expressing "strong" opposition.

The Associated Press-GfK poll, on the other hand, continued to find a significant majority opposed to the Afghan escalation. Despite Obama's "prime-time TV speech explaining how he reached his decision," commented the AP, "there was no change in the public's resistance to escalation. Just 42 percent favor sending more troops while 56 percent oppose it. Overall, most people—and most of Obama's fellow Democrats—don't think Afghanistan is a conflict worth fighting."

A Pew Research poll, issued in early December, reported that only 32 percent of those surveyed favored increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan. A plurality of Americans think the US should "mind its own business internationally," a result the pollsters chose to dub "isolationist." (Intriguingly, the Pew poll found—by a margin of 41 percent to 25—that Americans think the US plays a less important role in world affairs than it did a decade ago, and that only 27 percent of Americans think the US is the world's top economic power, as compared to 44 percent who believe China has taken over that spot.)

It should be noted that the type of question asked is not an insignificant matter. Generally, the establishment pollsters give respondents a choice between the administration's position and an even more right-wing alternative. Or, the questions treat official claims as though they were unchallengeable facts. For example, this question in the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll: "Do you think the United States must win the war in Afghanistan in order for the broader war on terrorism to be a success, or do you think the war on terrorism can be a success without the United States winning the war in Afghanistan?"!



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