

On Politics, Economy and the American Dream The Public Calls Time Out for a Reality Check

Here's the latest on the reality-check front: Just half of Americans say the American Dream still holds true. Only a quarter would want their child to run for Congress. And for all the shouting, half don't think either political party can do much with the economy.

But at least, most say, George W. Bush isn't running the show.

So finds a new ABC News/Yahoo! News poll, inaugurating a new polling partnership taking a fresh look at some issues in the news. One finding: For all their economic gripes, 52 percent of Americans say they'd rather have President Obama than his predecessor in control of economic policy, vs. 35 percent who'd prefer to have former President Bush in charge.

Still, that's not as bad as it once was for Bush, who fell as low as 23 percent approval in ABC News/Washington Post polling during his presidency, en route to the lowest average second-term ratings in modern polling history.

Other results in this national, random-sample survey, conducted for ABC News and Yahoo! News by Langer Research Associates, shake a stick at all the electioneering under way in the 2010 midterm campaign.

Take the economy, the main election issue by far. Americans roughly divide, 26 percent vs. 23 percent, on whether it would have a better chance of improving if the Republicans take control of Congress or the Democrats keep the helm. The challenge to both: A plurality, 47 percent, says control of Congress in fact won't have much effect on the economy one way or the other. Take that, partisan policy wonks.

The political field gets an even sharper jab from another result. Just 25 percent of Americans say they'd want a child of theirs to grow up to be a candidate for Congress. An overwhelming 71 percent would rather see their little darlings pick some other line of work. (See separate story.)

And then there's the American Dream – if you work hard, you'll get ahead. Half of Americans say that old adage still holds true, perhaps not all that bad, given the economy's condition. But 43 percent say this basic principle of grade-school civics once was true, but isn't any more. And an additional 4 percent, confirmed curmudgeons, say it never was.

It came up just yesterday: "It feels like the American Dream is not attainable to a lot of us," a participant at a town hall meeting with Obama said. "Is the American Dream dead for me?"

It's a question, given these results, that about half the country shares.

GROUPS – Digging beneath the topline numbers reveals some interesting differences among groups across these questions. Here’s a summary:

DREAM ON – Better-off Americans are more apt to think the American Dream still lives – among those with household incomes over \$75,000 a year, 57 percent say so; among those with incomes under \$25,000 that slides to 46 percent. Similarly the Dream gets more devotees among the college-educated – no surprise, because education strongly predicts income.

There’s a political difference as well – confidence in the American Dream bottoms out at 46 percent among independents, who tend to be more turned off to the system in general, vs. 58 percent among Democrats and a similar 54 percent among Republicans. And true perhaps to their pioneer spirit, confidence in the American Dream peaks in the West, again at 58 percent, vs. 46 percent in the rust-belted Midwest.

Perhaps given Obama’s election as the first African-American president, 57 percent of nonwhites say the American Dream still holds true, surpassing the number of whites who say so, 48 percent.

ECONOMY – Partisan differences sharpen up on whether either party could fix the economy. Among Republicans, 67 percent say it’d do better with their team running Congress. Among Democrats, fewer but still 58 percent think the economy would fare better if they stay in control. But a whopping 65 percent of independents say it just wouldn’t matter one way or the other.

There’s also a difference among age groups on this question: Older adults are especially likely to say it makes a difference which party controls Congress. Among those under 55 years old, 51 percent say party control won’t affect what happens with the economy; that declines to 42 percent among 55- to 64-year-olds, and further, to 34 percent, of seniors, age 65 and up. Interestingly, that’s the group closest in memory to the Great Depression.

Still, while seniors are more apt to say party control matters, they divide almost exactly evenly on which party would do more for the economy – 30 percent pick the Democrats, 28 percent the Republicans.

OBAMA vs. BUSH – There are two roots of the public’s preference for Obama over Bush to run economic policy today. Obama’s better in his base: Ninety percent of Democrats prefer him, vs. 76 percent of Republicans who’d prefer a Bush encore. And independents, the swing voters in such matters, prefer Obama over Bush on the economy by a 16-point margin, 49 percent to 33 percent.

Obama also does much better vs. Bush among young adults, women, low-income Americans and members of racial minorities – reflecting partisan patterns, these being more Democratic groups. Most strikingly, Obama’s preferred to Bush among nonwhites by 75 percent to 14 percent, while whites divide more evenly – 45 percent for Bush, 41 percent for Obama. (That’s not a statistically significant advantage for Bush among whites, given the poll’s margin of sampling error, but the sharp difference from nonwhites is impressive.)

Overall preference for Obama vs. Bush doesn't mean most people think Obama's doing beautifully on the economy – just 41 percent in the last ABC/Post poll approved of how he's handling it, and as many said his policies have worsened the economy as said they've improved it. Instead he prevails simply in comparison to Bush, whose approval rating for handling the economy fell as low as 22 percent in an ABC/Post poll in September 2008.

Even today, more blame the economy's condition on the Bush administration, for a lack of financial regulations that could have helped avoid the crisis, than on Obama, for failing to turn it around more effectively.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Yahoo News! poll was conducted Sept. 8- 14, 2010, among a random national sample of 1,006 adults. Respondents were selected using an address-based sample design. Households for which a phone number could be ascertained were contacted by phone; others were contacted by mail and asked to complete the survey via a toll-free inbound phone number or the internet. See details [here](#). Results for the full sample have a 4-point error margin. Click [here](#) for a detailed description of sampling error.

This survey was produced by [Langer Research Associates](#) of New York, N.Y, with sampling, data collection and tabulation by SSRS of Media, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollingunit>

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Full results follow.

1. Do you think the economy will have a better chance of improving (if the Democrats remain in control of Congress), (if the Republicans take control of Congress), or do you think that either way it won't affect what happens with the economy?

| | Democrats | Republicans | Won't affect what happens | No opinion |
|---------|-----------|-------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| 9/14/10 | 23 | 26 | 47 | 5 |

2. Who would you rather have in control of economic policy right now - (Barack Obama) or (George W. Bush)?

| | Barack Obama | George W. Bush | Neither (vol.) | Both (vol.) | No opinion |
|---------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|
| 9/14/10 | 52 | 35 | 9 | 1 | 3 |

3. Do you think the American Dream - that if you work hard you'll get ahead - still holds true, never held true, or once held true but does not anymore?

| | Still true | Once true | Never true | No opinion |
|---------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| 9/14/10 | 50 | 43 | 4 | 2 |

4. On another subject, if you had children, would you want your own son or daughter to grow up to be a candidate for U.S. Congress, or would you rather see them pick some other line of work?

| | Congress | Other work | No opinion |
|---------|----------|------------|------------|
| 9/14/10 | 25 | 71 | 4 |