

Bush's Transition Grades are Strong – But the Economy Threatens Turbulence

While George W. Bush wins broad public approval for his transition work to date, the road could quickly get rough: Most Americans see a recession coming, and relatively few give top priority to the cornerstone of his economic program, a tax cut.

While 70 percent say the economy is in good shape, that's fallen seven points in just the last few weeks. More ominously, 55 percent in a new ABC News/Washington Post poll think the country is headed into a recession. It's a particular risk to Bush because when the economy sours, presidential approval almost always follows.

Bush, moreover, faces some skepticism about his economic program. Tax cuts long have held only middling public priority, and today is no exception: Just 26 percent give top-level priority to a tax cut, placing it 12th out of 18 issues tested. And if taxes are to be cut, slightly more people prefer smaller, targeted cuts to Bush's across-the-board plan.

As he mobilizes to organize his administration, deal with the economy and promote his programs alike, Bush also faces fundamental skepticism from a sizable minority of Americans: Forty percent still don't think he was legitimately elected, including 46 percent of women, 73 percent of Democrats and 83 percent of blacks.

ASHCROFT – Nonetheless, Bush gets good grades to date. More than seven in 10 approve of his handling of the transition and two-thirds approve of “most of the choices” he's made for his cabinet – customary ratings for an incoming president.

Somewhat fewer but still a majority, 54 percent, favor confirmation of his attorney general nominee, John Ashcroft; the rest roughly divide between opposing Ashcroft and withholding judgment.

	1/15/01
Approve of Bush's transition work	72%
Approve of most cabinet choices	66
Support Ashcroft's confirmation	54

Ashcroft's confirmation hearings begin today before the Senate Judiciary Committee. In a test of the strength of his critics, a subsample in this poll was told that he's opposed by “organized labor and some groups that advocate women's rights, legal abortion, civil rights and gun control.” This produces roughly an even split on the nomination – while opposition rises, it still does not exceed Ashcroft's support.

	Senate action on Ashcroft:		
	Confirm	Reject	No opinion
Sample 1: Opposition not mentioned	54%	26	21
Sample 2: Opposition mentioned	47	43	10

Majorities do have specific policy differences with Ashcroft. Fifty-nine percent of Americans favor legal abortion (up a bit from its recent levels), and 83 percent say it should be legal specifically in cases of rape or incest. In another contrast to Ashcroft's views, 59 percent favor stricter gun control laws (down a bit from its recent highs).

Opinion on affirmative action, another issue that may come under discussion at the Ashcroft hearings and in Bush's presidency beyond, is nuanced. Sixty-nine percent of Americans oppose giving women and minorities "preference over white men" in hiring, promotions and college admissions. But 73 percent support giving "assistance, but not preference" to these groups. And about as many people give priority to "improving opportunities for women and minorities" as, for example, to a tax cut.

AGENDA - The public's agenda for Bush and the new Congress is much like it was in the razor-close presidential election. Education, the economy, Social Security and health care costs continue to top the list; more than four in 10 give these the highest priority, and more than eight in 10 rank them as either "highest" or "high" priority.

Some issues that garner considerable attention are much lower on the public's priority list. Among those Bush has stressed, in addition to a tax cut, are upgrading military systems and salaries, ranking 15th and 17th.

Campaign finance reform also gets comparatively low priority, as does a role for Bush and the Congress in "improving race relations." And the goal of reducing political partisanship in Washington, for all its presumed appeal, ranks dead last in public priority.

	Priority for Bush and Congress:	
	Highest	High, not highest
Improving education	49%	42
Keeping the economy strong	47	48
Protecting Social Security	46	42
Holding down health care costs	44	42
Prescription drug coverage	39	46
Keeping the budget balanced	35	51
Reducing illegal drug use	32	40
Election balloting reform	32	35
Health coverage for uninsured	31	43
Improving opportunities for women and minorities	29	42
Environmental protection	27	45
Cutting taxes	26	39
Banning partial-birth abortion	26	19
Improving race relations	24	42
Upgrading military systems	24	39

Campaign finance reform	20	34
Raising military pay	19	38
Reducing political partisanship	17	34

There are some differences on these items among population groups. Concerns about Social Security, health care costs, prescription drug coverage and illegal drug use all increase with age; concern about education, by contrast, decreases with age. Women are more concerned than men about issues including education, health care costs and coverage and the environment; racial minorities express more concern than whites about education, health care coverage, election balloting reform and race relations.

MISSILES ABOVE – A few particular issues are good examples of the challenges Bush faces in moving public opinion behind his proposals. One is a missile defense system: Most Americans support the concept in principle, but that support dissipates dramatically in the fact of counter-arguments on the price, workability and ramifications of the project.

Specifically, 80 percent favor missile defense on its face. But support falls to 50 percent given doubt among some scientists whether the system could fully protect the United States; 45 percent given an estimated \$60 to \$100 billion cost; also 45 percent if it could create a new arms race; and 37 percent if it would break an existing arms control treaty with Russia.

OIL BELOW – Another example is Bush’s support for oil and natural gas exploration and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Fifty-six percent oppose the idea.

That’s the case even though most people are persuaded that finding new energy sources is more important than improving energy conservation. The issue seems to be one of environmental sensitivity: Despite the public’s broad concern about the economy, 56 percent say protecting the environment is more important than encouraging economic growth.

VOUCH – A third example is school vouchers for children in underperforming schools. The public splits about evenly on the idea – 48 percent support it, 50 percent oppose it. And earlier polling has shown that opposition rises if a voucher program had the effect of cutting public school funding.

A QUESTION OF MANDATE – Bush approaches office with expectations that are no lower or higher than usual. Fifty-one percent of Americans expect him to be an outstanding or above average president, about the same as expectations both for Bill Clinton and for Bush’s father as they approached their inaugurations.

But given the closeness of the election, Bush may be somewhat cramped on the question of a mandate. By an 11-point margin, 52 to 41 percent, more people say Bush should “compromise with the Democrats on issues they strongly oppose” than feel he “has a mandate to carry out the agenda he presented during the presidential campaign.”

Still, support for compromise doesn't mean Bush needs to act incrementally. By 47-38 percent, more people think he has a mandate to "work for major new programs" rather than limit himself to "small policy changes."

The challenge is to ensure those programs win public support. And for Bush, achieving popularity probably means addressing perceptions that he is more favorably inclined toward the interests of traditional Republican constituencies – the military, white men, large corporations, the well-off and religious conservatives. Very large majorities think he'll work mainly to support the interests of each of these groups.

Fewer, but still around two-thirds, think Bush will work for the interests of the middle class and racial and ethnic minority groups (although many minorities themselves are dubious). There's greater doubt about the concern Bush will show women's rights groups, the poor, environmental groups and labor unions.

	Think Bush will work mainly	
	For	Against
The military	92%	5
Large corporations	86	10
White men	85	5
Wealthy people	85	10
Religious conservatives	74	15
Hispanics	67	26
The middle class	65	32
Other minorities	65	27
Blacks	64	29
Women's rights groups	56	39
Poor people	52	44
Environmental groups	50	42
Labor unions	45	47

THE RACES – Finally, one striking result in this poll is the difference between blacks and whites in their views of Bush. It shouldn't be surprising, given blacks' strong preference for the Democratic Party in general. (See 12/20 ABC News Polling Unit memo, "Politics in Black and White.") For example, while 78 percent of whites approve of Bush's handling of the transition, this plummets to 39 percent of blacks.

In other examples, 77 percent of blacks think Bush will do a "worse job" as president than Clinton; just 32 percent of blacks (compared to 71 percent of whites) think Bush can deal with the job; and while 65 percent of whites think Bush was legitimately elected, only 11 percent of blacks agree. Of all the challenges facing Bush as president, winning the confidence of black Americans may be the greatest.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone Jan. 11-15, 2001, among a random national sample of 1,513 adults. The results have a 2.5-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet, at:

<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/PollVault/PollVault.html>

Here are the full results:

*= less than 0.5 percent

1-7. To be released.

8. On another subject, would you describe the state of the nation's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?

	----Excellent/Good-----			-----Not so good/Poor-----			No opin.
	NET	Excellent	Good	NET	Not so good	Poor	
1/15/01	70	10	59	29	24	6	1
12/24/00*	77	9	68	23	17	6	*
6/11/00	74	17	57	26	19	6	*
2/27/00	80	25	55	20	14	5	*
10/31/99	74	18	56	26	18	7	1
9/2/99	76	19	57	23	16	6	1
3/14/99	80	22	58	19	15	4	1
11/1/98	73	12	61	26	21	5	1
11/1/98 LV	78	13	65	22	19	3	*
10/13/97	61	12	49	39	27	11	*

*ABC/Money. Call for full trend.

9. We'd like to know what kind of priority you want to see George W. Bush and the Congress give to some issues. For each one, please tell me if it should receive the highest priority, a high priority but not the highest, a middle priority, or a lower priority.

1/15/01

	-----High-----					(VOL) None	No. op.
	NET	Highest	High	Middle	Lower		
a. Keeping the economy strong	95	47	48	4	1	0	0
b. Protecting the Social Security system	88	46	42	10	3	0	*
c. Holding down the cost of health care and health insurance	86	44	42	11	3	*	*
d. Keeping the federal budget balanced	86	35	51	12	1	*	1
e. Reducing the use of illegal drugs	71	32	40	18	10	1	1
f. Reforming election campaign finance laws	54	20	34	29	15	1	1
g. Reducing the political partisanship in Washington	50	17	34	29	11	3	7
h. Raising pay and benefits for military personnel	58	19	38	33	8	*	1
i. Improving opportunities in jobs and education for women and minorities	71	29	42	23	6	*	0
j. Cutting taxes	65	26	39	24	9	1	2
k. Improving education and the schools	91	49	42	5	2	1	0
l. Expanding health care coverage for the uninsured	74	31	43	20	5	1	1
m. Helping the elderly pay							

for prescription drugs	86	39	46	11	2	1	1
n. Protecting the environment	71	27	45	21	6	*	2
o. Upgrading military systems and equipment	63	24	39	22	13	*	2
p. Banning the abortion procedure known as partial-birth abortion	45	26	19	17	26	7	5
q. Establishing uniform standards for ballots, voting machines and recount rules in presidential elections	67	32	35	18	12	1	2
r. Improving race relations	65	24	42	26	6	1	1

10. Which of these would you prefer: (A large tax-cut plan that provides an across-the-board tax cut for everyone), or (A smaller tax cut plan that provides targeted tax cuts mainly for lower and middle-income people).

	Large cut	Smaller cut	No opinion
1/15/01	47	51	2
10/9/00 RV	48	48	4
9/6/00 RV	45	53	2

11. As you know, Bush is about to begin his first term as president. What type of president do you think Bush will be - an outstanding president, above average, below average, or poor?

	-----Above Average-----			Avg. (vol.)	--Below Average-----			No op.
	NET	Outstanding	Above		NET	Below	Poor	
1/15/01	51	10	40	19	27	16	11	3

Compare to:

1/17/93 Clinton	56	11	45	21	19	14	5	5
1/16/89 Bush	50	8	42	28	18	13	5	4

12. Do you think Bush will do a better job as president than Clinton, a worse job than Clinton or what?

	Better	Worse	(VOL) About the same	No opin.
1/15/01	43	39	12	6

Compare to:

1/17/93 Clinton	55	21	17	7
1/16/89 Bush	23	11	64	2

13. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the presidential transition?

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
1/15/01	72	21	6

Compare to:

1/17/93 Clinton	81	13	6
12/14/92* Clinton	72	13	15
12/14/92 Bush	76	16	7

*"is handling"

14. Do you approve or disapprove of most of the choices Bush has made for his Cabinet and other top positions in his administration?

	Approve	Disapprove	Approve Some/ Disapprove Others(vol.)	No opinion
1/15/01	66	22	4	8

Compare to:

Clinton:

1/15/97	58	30	6	6
1/17/93	60	17	6	17
12/14/92	61	13	5	21

Bush:

2/27/89*	75	20	NA	5
2/14/89	73	18	NA	10
2/9/89	71	20	NA	9
1/16/89**	59	15	NA	26

*2/27/89 and previous: "Do you approve or disapprove of most of the choices Bush has made for his Cabinet?"

**"so far?"

15. (ASKED OF HALF SAMPLE) Bush has nominated John Ashcroft for attorney general. Do you think the U.S. Senate should or should not confirm Ashcroft as attorney general?

	Should confirm	Should not confirm	No opin.
1/15/01	54	26	21

16. (ASKED OF HALF SAMPLE) Bush has nominated John Ashcroft for attorney general. This nomination is opposed by organized labor and by some groups that advocate women's rights, legal abortion, civil rights, and gun control. Do you think the U.S. Senate should or should not confirm Ashcroft as attorney general?

	Should confirm	Should not confirm	No opin.
1/15/01	47	43	10

17. (ASKED OF HALF SAMPLE) Bush has nominated Gale Norton for secretary of the interior. Do you think the U.S. Senate should or should not confirm Norton as secretary of the interior?

	Should confirm	Should not confirm	No opin.
1/15/01	51	17	32

18. (ASKED OF HALF SAMPLE) Bush has nominated Gale Norton for secretary of the interior. Some environmental groups oppose this nomination. Do you think the U.S. Senate should or should not confirm Norton as secretary of the interior?

	Should confirm	Should not confirm	No opin.
1/15/01	46	28	25

19. Do you think Bush is able to deal with the big issues facing this country, or not?

	Yes	No	No opinion
1/15/01	66	31	3

Compare to:

	Yes	No	No opinion
1/15/97 Clinton	60	38	1
1/17/93 Clinton	67	28	5
8/9/92 Bush	43	54	3
2/2/92 Bush	50	48	2
3/4/91 Bush	84	15	1

20. Do you consider Bush to have been legitimately elected as president, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
1/15/01	58	40	2
12/15/00	55	42	3
12/10/00*	71	27	1
12/3/00	73	23	4
11/26/00	76	19	5

*12/10 and previous: "If this ends with Bush winning the presidency, will you consider him ..."

21. (Rotate with 22) Do you think Bush has a mandate to carry out the agenda he presented during the presidential campaign, or should he compromise on the things the Democrats strongly oppose?

	Has mandate	Should compromise	No opinion
1/15/01	41	52	7

22. (Rotate with 21) Do you think Bush has a mandate to work for (major new social and economic programs) or for (only small policy changes)?

	Major new programs	Small policy changes	No opin.
1/15/01	47	38	15

23. For each group I name, please tell me whether you think Bush will work mainly FOR or mainly AGAINST the interests of that group. First is (READ ITEM). How about (NEXT ITEM)?

1/15/01	-----Bush will work-----		No opin.
	For group	Against group	
a. Labor unions	45	47	9
b. Large corporations	86	10	4
c. Poor people	52	44	4
d. Wealthy people	85	10	5
e. The middle class	65	32	3
f. Women's rights groups	56	39	5
g. The military	92	5	3
h. Environmental groups	50	42	7
i. Religious conservatives	74	15	11
j. Blacks/African-Americans	64	29	7
k. Hispanics	67	26	7x
l. Other racial and ethnic minorities	65	27	8x
m. White men	85	5	10

24. Just your best guess, do you think the economy is heading into a recession, or not?

	Yes	No	No opin.
1/15/01	55	42	3

25-30. To be released.

31. On another subject, do you favor or oppose stricter gun control laws in this country? Is that strongly or somewhat favor/oppose?

	-----Favor-----			-----Oppose-----			No opin.
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	
1/15/01	59	46	13	39	26	13	2
5/10/00	67	50	17	30	22	9	3
4/2/00	64	49	14	34	21	13	2
9/2/99	63	52	11	35	25	11	2
8/15/99	63	46	16	34	22	12	3
5/16/99	67	55	12	31	21	10	1
10/13/93*	64	40	24	33	20	13	3
6/8/89*	60	28	32	34	23	11	6

*Gallup: "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose enacting tougher gun control laws?"

32. On another subject, do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases or illegal in all cases?

	-----Legal-----			-----Illegal-----			
	NET	All cases	Most cases	NET	All cases	Most cases	No opin.
1/15/01	59	21	38	39	14	25	1
9/6/00 RV	55	20	35	42	16	25	3
7/23/00 RV	53	20	33	43	17	26	4
7/23/00	53	20	33	43	17	26	4
9/2/99	56	20	37	42	15	26	2
3/14/99	55	21	34	42	15	27	3
7/12/98	54	19	35	42	13	29	4
8/5/96	56	22	34	41	14	27	3
6/30/96	58	24	34	40	14	25	2
10/1/95	60	26	35	37	12	25	3
9/21/95	60	24	36	36	11	25	4
7/17/95	59	27	32	40	14	26	1

33. I'm going to read some specific situations under which an abortion might be considered. For each, please say whether you think an abortion should be legal in that situation, or illegal:

1/15/01

Summary table:

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
a. When the woman's life is endangered	90	8	1
b. When the woman's physical health is endangered	85	14	1
c. When the pregnancy was caused by rape or incest	83	16	2
d. When the woman is not married and does not want the baby	44	55	1

Trend:

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
a. When the woman's life is endangered			
1/15/01	90	8	1
1/13/98	83	15	2

7/28/96*	88	7	5
4/13/89	89	8	4

b. When the woman's physical health is endangered

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
1/15/01	85	14	1
1/13/98	79	19	2
7/28/96*	82	11	8

c. When the pregnancy was caused by rape or incest

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
1/15/01	83	16	2
1/13/98	78	20	2
7/28/96*	77	18	5

d. When the woman is not married and does not want the baby

	Legal	Illegal	No opinion
1/15/01	44	55	1
1/13/98	39	59	2

*Gallup. No opinion and "depends" combined.

34. On another subject, in areas where the local public schools are not meeting state standards, would you support or oppose the federal government giving parents money to send their children to private or religious schools instead?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
1/15/01	48	50	2
9/6/00 RV	44	54	2
4/2/00* RV	45	53	3
4/2/00*	46	51	3

*"In areas where the local public schools are not improving . . ."

35. Do you support or oppose building a defense system that's designed to protect the United States from incoming missiles?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
1/15/01	80	18	3

36. (ASKED IF SUPPORT) Would you support or oppose a missile defense system:

1/15/01

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
a. If cost estimates run anywhere from 60 billion to 100 billion dollars?	57	37	6
b. If scientists raised doubts about whether it ever could completely protect the U.S. from incoming missiles?	62	33	5
c. If it broke an existing treaty with Russia?	47	47	6
d. If it could create a new arms race as other countries tried to build better missiles?	57	39	4

35/36 Net table:

	Support	NET	-----Oppose----- In this case	In general	No opin.
a. If cost estimates run anywhere from 60 billion to 100 billion dollars?	45	47	29	18	8
b. If scientists raised doubts about whether it ever could completely protect the U.S. from incoming missiles?	50	44	26	18	7
c. If it broke an existing treaty with Russia?	37	56	38	18	7
d. If it could create a new arms race as other countries tried to build better missiles?	45	49	31	18	6

37. On another subject, which is more important to you personally - protecting the environment or encouraging economic growth?

	Protecting the environment	Encouraging economic growth	No opin.
1/15/01	56	39	5

38. What do you think is more important- (finding new energy sources), or (improving energy conservation)?

	Finding new energy sources	Improving energy conservation	No opin.
1/15/01	55	41	4

39. Do you think the federal government should or should not allow oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska?

	Yes	No	No opinion
1/15/01	38	56	5
5/13/89*	26	60	13

*"Do you think the federal government should allow new oil drilling..."

40. How much commercial oil and gas drilling, logging and mining do you think the federal government should permit in the national forest system - a lot, some, very little or none?

	Lot	Some	Little	None	No opinion
1/15/01	10	40	29	18	3

41. Do you support or oppose government and private programs that give women, blacks and other minorities preference over white men getting into college, getting a job, or getting a promotion?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
1/15/01	28	69	3

42. Do you support or oppose government and private programs that give women, blacks and other minorities assistance--but not preference--getting into college, getting a job, or getting a promotion?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
1/15/01	73	25	2

43. When it comes to getting into college, getting a job, or getting a promotion, do you think women, blacks and other minorities currently have (the same opportunities) as/than white men, (fewer opportunities) or (more opportunities)?

	More	Same	Fewer	No opinion
1/15/01	19	37	43	1

44-50. To be released.

END