

Year After Obama vs. McCain It's Obama vs. the Economy

A year after he went one-on-one with John McCain, Barack Obama's now playing for time.

For all that's transpired since his election as president, public opinion has not moved on the big issue, the current economy. The question a year later is how long Obama's got until it goes up, or he goes down – possibly with his party in tow.

The danger was evident in Tuesday's off-year voting, in which the incumbent Democratic Party lost the New Jersey and Virginia governorships, with 89 and 85 percent of voters, respectively, worried about the economy in the year ahead. Majorities were "very" worried – and they voted Republican by wide margins, 61-34 percent in New Jersey, 77-23 percent in Virginia.

Compare with a year ago: Obama won voters who were very worried about the economy by 22 points nationally and by almost identical margins in New Jersey and Virginia alike.

	Vote preference among those "very worried" about the economy	
	Dem	Rep
2009: Gov		
New Jersey	34%	61
Virginia	23	77
2008: Pres		
National	60	38
New Jersey	61	38
Virginia	59	40

Other than the direction of the vote, little has changed in basic economic views since the maelstrom blew into town. Economic worry in New Jersey and Virginia this week was almost exactly the same as in the 2008 exit polls there. Nationally, the ABC News Consumer Comfort Index likewise is almost precisely the same today as a year ago – near its worst in 23 years.

There have been partisan shifts – economic confidence is higher among Democrats than it was a year ago, lower among Republicans – but with no net movement. Crucially, it's unchanged among independents, the centerweight of politics. A year ago Obama won independents by 8 points. This week they favored Republicans Chris Christie and Bob McDonnell by 2-1.

	Vote preference among independents	
	Dem	Rep
2009: Gov		
New Jersey	30%	60
Virginia	33	66

2008: Pres		
National	52	44
New Jersey	51	47
Virginia	49	48

Unpacking this to get past the influence of partisanship on economic sentiment, there's a sobering result for the Democrats: Just among independents who are very worried about the economy, McDonnell won by a huge 65 points, Christie by 48. Obama in 2008 finished ahead among very worried independents in both states, but by much smaller margins – 10 points in Virginia, just 3 in New Jersey. Nationally, he won very worried independents by 15.

	Vote preference among "very worried" independents	
	Dem	Rep
2009: Gov		
New Jersey	22%	70
Virginia	17	82
2008: Pres		
National	55	40
New Jersey	50	47
Virginia	54	44

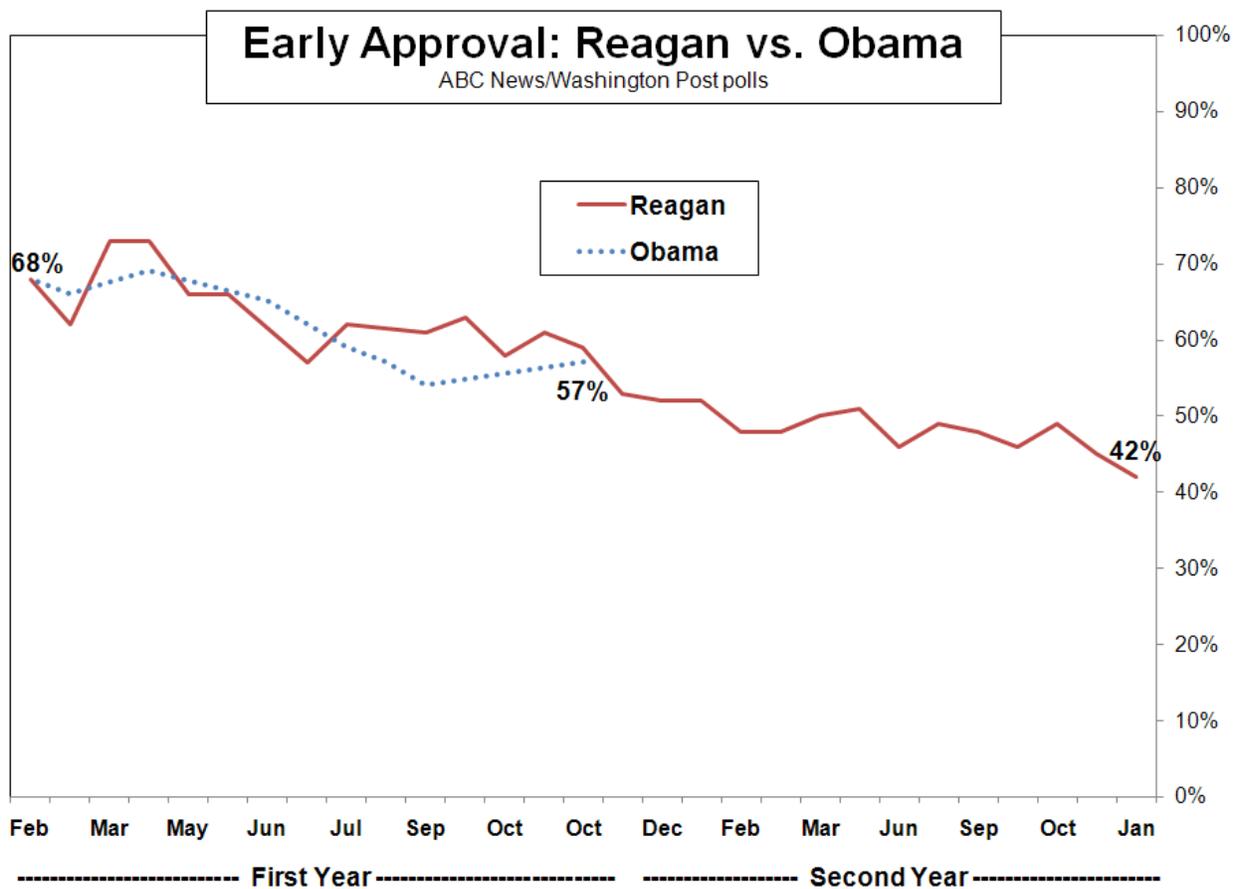
CONCERNS – It's no wonder economic concerns still rage. Last quarter's recovery in GDP, important as it is, does not represent what most Americans experience at home. Unemployment does: it's risen nearly 4 points in the past year; add discouraged workers and it's up by nearly 6 points. And those still working have seen a drop in the average workweek from 33.6 hours to 33 hours, tying the fewest in records since 1964.

Two historical analogies bear watching, both tied to previous serious recessions. Ronald Reagan, the last president to take office in a recessionary period (technically between a double-dip), lost public approval during his first year in office, dropping in particular just after he crossed the one-year mark. He then labored mostly under 50 percent in his second year, regaining consistent majority approval only as economic recovery took hold in the spring of his third year.

What helped Reagan is that when the recovery came, it was a brisk one.

The other analogy is to 1992 and 1994. Nearly eight in 10 voters in the presidential election said the economy was in bad shape, and they voted 52-27-22 percent for Bill Clinton vs. George Bush vs. Ross Perot; it got Clinton elected. By 1994 growth was at hand, but sluggishly; in midterm elections that year 59 percent still said the economy was bad, and they favored Republican congressional candidates by 62-36 percent, helping lift the GOP to a 52-seat gain and control of the House for the first time since 1952.

The critical question for Obama's second year is the speed and durability of recovery now, and the extent to which it's felt by average Americans.



Some signs – including the stock market’s improvement and this week’s reported rise in October retail sales – are positive. But some economists question what comes after the government’s economic stimulus spending is drawn down. And there Obama’s room to move is limited; 57 percent in the last ABC/Post poll opposed more deficit spending for stimulus purposes.

If recovery is slow, the question is whether economic discontent creates produces a generalized anti-incumbent sentiment, putting both parties at risk; or whether the Republicans can successfully focus that discontent on the Democrats, as they did in 1994. One challenge is the GOP’s general unpopularity; on average in ABC/Post polls this year just 23 percent of Americans have identified themselves as Republicans, the fewest since 1983.

Elements from the New Jersey gubernatorial election offer further clues. One underscores the power of anti-incumbency. The top candidate attribute in New Jersey, cited by 39 percent of voters, was someone who “can bring needed change.” This also was the top attribute in 2008, nationally and in New Jersey alike. Then, among voters who picked it, nine in 10 supported Obama; this week, among New Jersey voters who picked it, 67 percent backed the Republican, Christie.

Even as he went down to anti-incumbency, Corzine prevailed among voters who cited the economy as the single most important issue in their vote. That may mean Democrats can compete on the economy; more Americans, after all, still blame it on George W. Bush than on Obama. But it also could just be a local phenomenon, if some economy voters in New Jersey simply peeled off that issue to complain specifically about property taxes, a special irritant there; property tax voters went to Christie by 42 points.

Another concern for Obama's forces looking ahead to 2010 is the durability of the coalition he assembled in 2008. New Jersey and Virginia this week saw turnout among adults under age 30 drop by roughly 50 percent from a year ago, when Obama won them by record-shattering margins. And in Virginia, young voters who did turn out went to the Republican, McDonnell, by a 10-point margin.

Naturally there's more on Obama's plate. War is another great threat to presidential popularity, and while Americans haven't turned broadly against the war in Afghanistan they're clearly conflicted about it, with support for containing al Qaeda and the Taliban but also concern about the costs and challenges of the war, and a sense the administration lacks a clear plan to handle it.

Health care reform draws a divided public response as well, with support for a variety of initiatives coupled with significant concern that they could do more harm than good.

Some of Obama's best ratings lately have been in handling international affairs, contrary to questions during the 2008 campaign about his readiness for the global stage. His upcoming trip to Asia plays to that strength, and changes the subject, at a time he could use it.

But when he returns, Afghanistan, health care – and especially the economy – will be waiting.

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