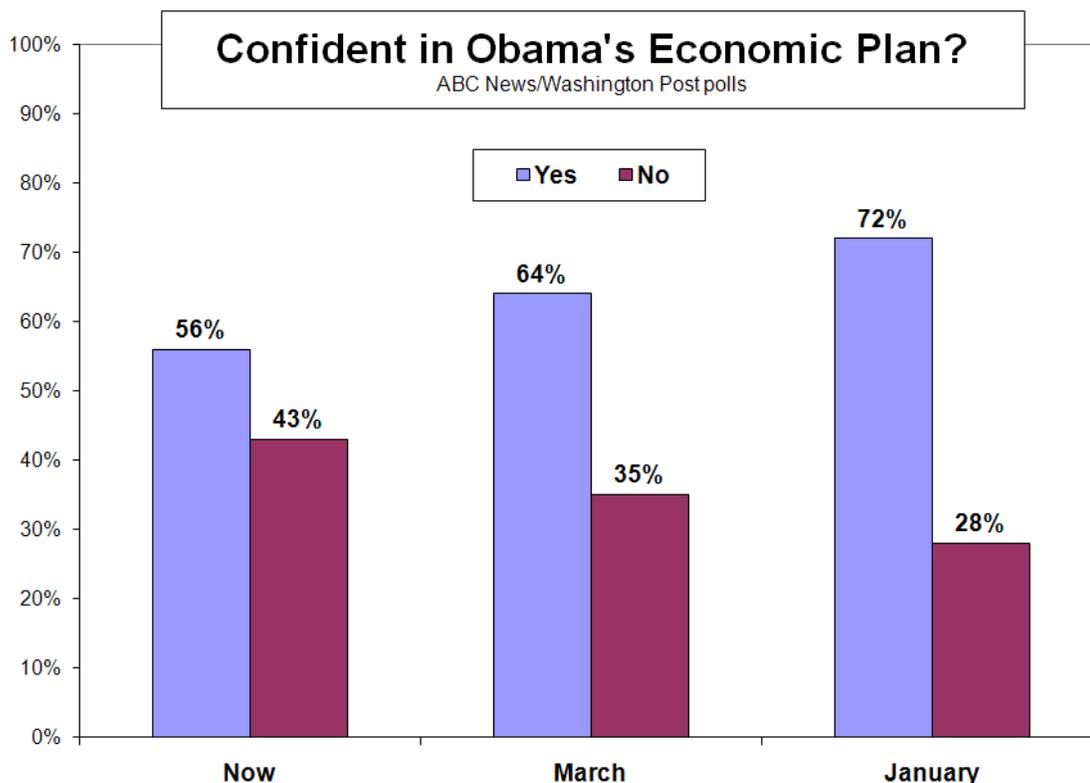


Six Months in, Rising Doubts on Issues Underscore Obama's Challenges Ahead

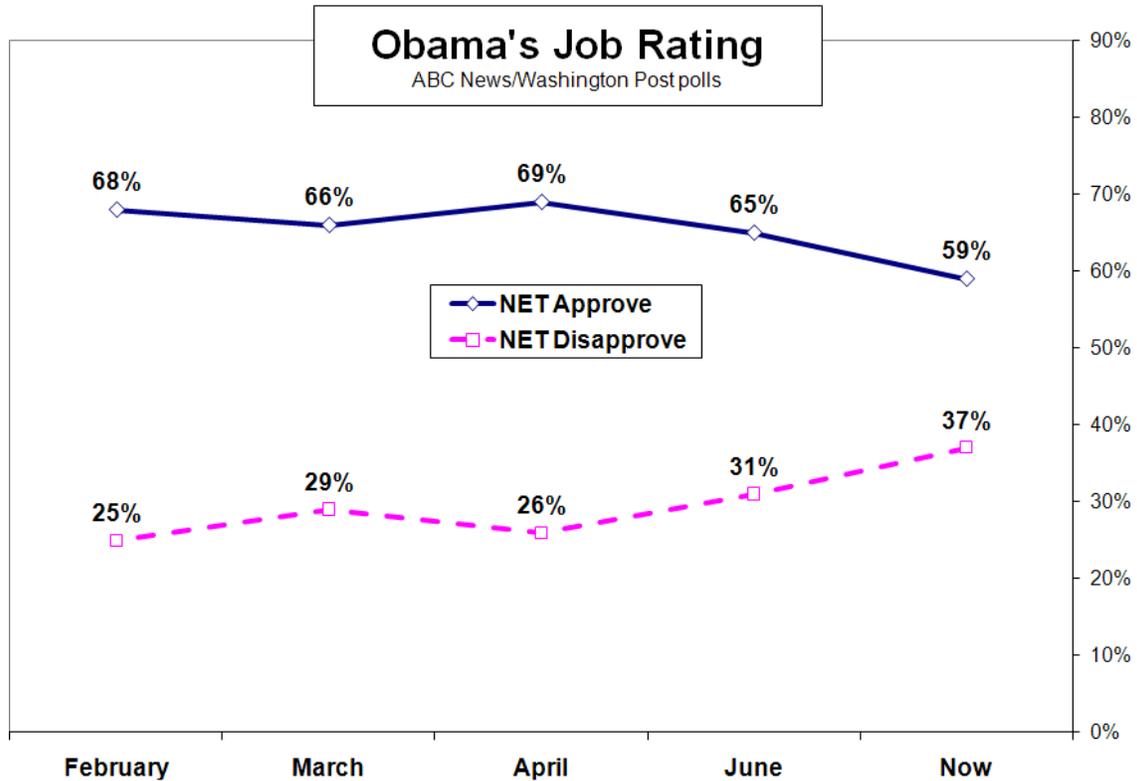
Rising doubts about the economic stimulus program, broad concern about the federal deficit and tepid support for President Obama's health care efforts are softening his popularity – and giving the still-struggling Republicans a glimmer of hope ahead.

While 56 percent of Americans still think Obama's approach will improve the economy, that's down sharply from a peak of 72 percent when he took office. With the deficit in mind, six in 10 oppose the additional stimulus spending the administration has mooted. And views of Obama as a "tax-and-spend Democrat" – the perception that dogged Bill Clinton in his early days – have gained 11 points since March.



More than Clinton, though, Obama is following the early course charted by Ronald Reagan, the last president to take office in the teeth of a recession. Reagan's job approval rating fell to 57 percent near his six-month mark; Obama's is nearly the same, 59 percent in this ABC News/Washington Post poll, down 10 points from his springtime peak.

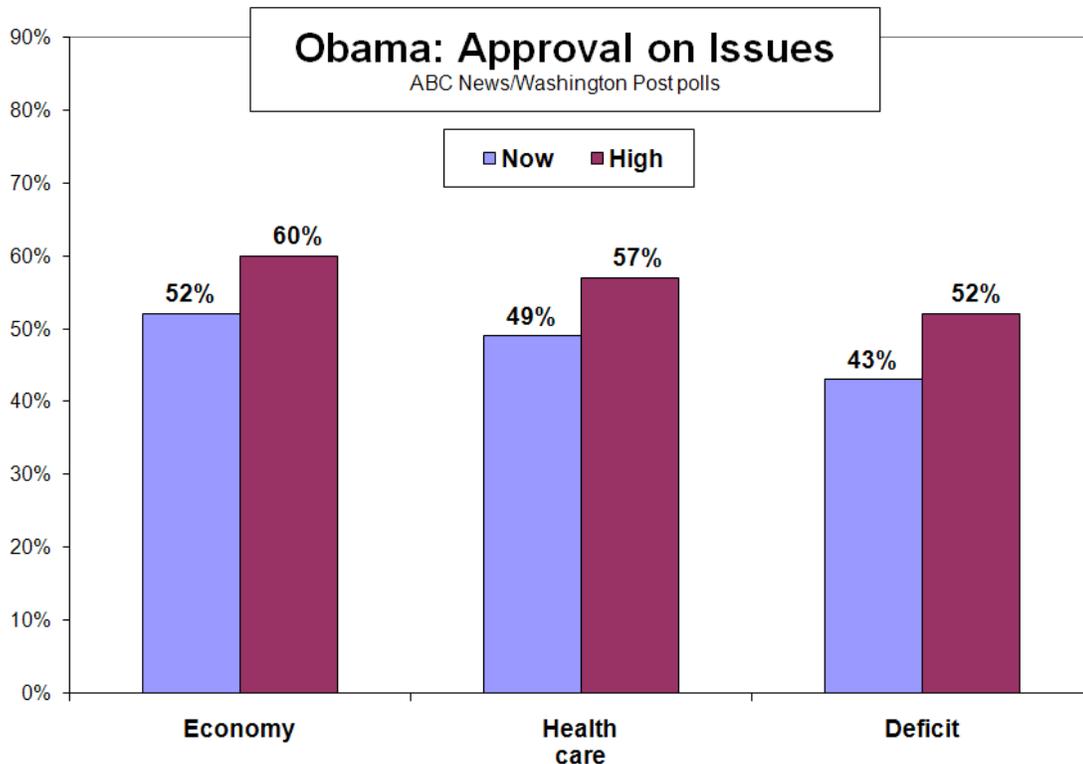
The bigger concern for Obama is what came next: Reagan weakened further as the economy struggled, bottoming out at 48 percent approval after his first year in office and 42 percent at the end of his second year, shortly after unemployment hit 10.8 percent, its highest since the 1940s. It's 9.5 percent now.



That history explains the urgency with which Obama's pushing a range of issues, notably health care; until the economy heads up, his popularity is likely to continue down.

One measure of what may lie ahead is a shift toward political neutrality: In this survey the number of Americans identifying themselves as independents, as opposed to either Democrats or Republicans, has tied its record high in ABC/Post polling since 1981.

ISSUES – Obama remains popular personally and far ahead of the Republicans in trust to handle specific issues, but it's his own ratings for handling those issues where his challenges show best. Barely over half, 52 percent, now approve of his work on the economy, down 8 points from its peak. Just under half, 49 percent, approve of his handling of health care, also down 8. And fewer, 43 percent, approve of his handling of the deficit, with 49 percent disapproving – only the second issue on which more have disapproved than approved of Obama's work. (The first was the automaker bailout.)



Intensity is running against the president on these issues as well. For the first time more people “strongly” disapprove of his work on the economy than strongly approve, 35 percent vs. 29 percent. Ditto on health care, 33 percent vs. 25 percent. And on the deficit, strong disapprovers now outnumber strong approvers by 2-1, 38 percent vs. 19 percent.

Another issue illustrates the president’s better possibilities: Despite rising casualties, 62 percent approve of his handling of the situation in Afghanistan, a far less partisan rating than his others, and with intensity running for him rather than against.

Specific to health care, this poll finds majority support for the chief elements of the proposal put forward by House Democrats last week, with 54 percent in favor, 43 percent opposed. But strong support and strong opposition are equal, at about a third each. And that’s without the pushback – concern about the impact on choice and quality of care – that long has been a counterweight to support for reform.

Obama has scheduled a prime-time news conference for Wednesday night, chiefly to address his health care efforts. A risk is that he may come to be seen as focused on other issues to the detriment of the economy.

GOP – The Republicans remain slow to capitalize on Obama’s challenges, but there are glimmers – or at least, a few measures that are less bad for them than they’ve been. For one, approval of the way the Republicans in Congress are handling their job is up 6 points since spring and up 11 points from a year ago, albeit just to 36 percent, with 58 percent disapproving. (The Democrats remain better rated; 47 percent approve. And even

today just 46 percent of Republicans approve of their own party's work in Congress; 79 percent of Democrats, by contrast, approve of their home team.)

Obama leads the GOP by 23 points in trust to handle the economy, 56-33 percent, essentially unchanged from last month; nonetheless that's the Republicans' best number on this question this year, and up 9 points from their low in April. Moreover, while Obama leads by 54-34 percent on health care, the Republican score is up 7 points from last month; and Obama's 54-35 percent lead on the deficit was 56-30 percent in June.

Basic partisanship fills out the picture. Thirty-three percent of Americans in this survey identify themselves as Democrats, slightly below the recent average and numerically the fewest in ABC/Post polls since September 2007. Just 22 percent identify themselves as Republicans, in line with their recent, extreme lows. Instead 41 percent now say they're political independents – tying the mark set in January 1996 as the most on record since ABC/Post polling began 28 years ago.

Most of the president's slippage is among Republicans; their approval of his work overall has dropped by 16 points since April, from 36 percent then to 20 percent now. (That honeymoon, such as it was, is over.) But he's also lost 9 points among independents since April (to 58 percent approval), while holding about steady among Democrats (93 percent then, 90 percent now).

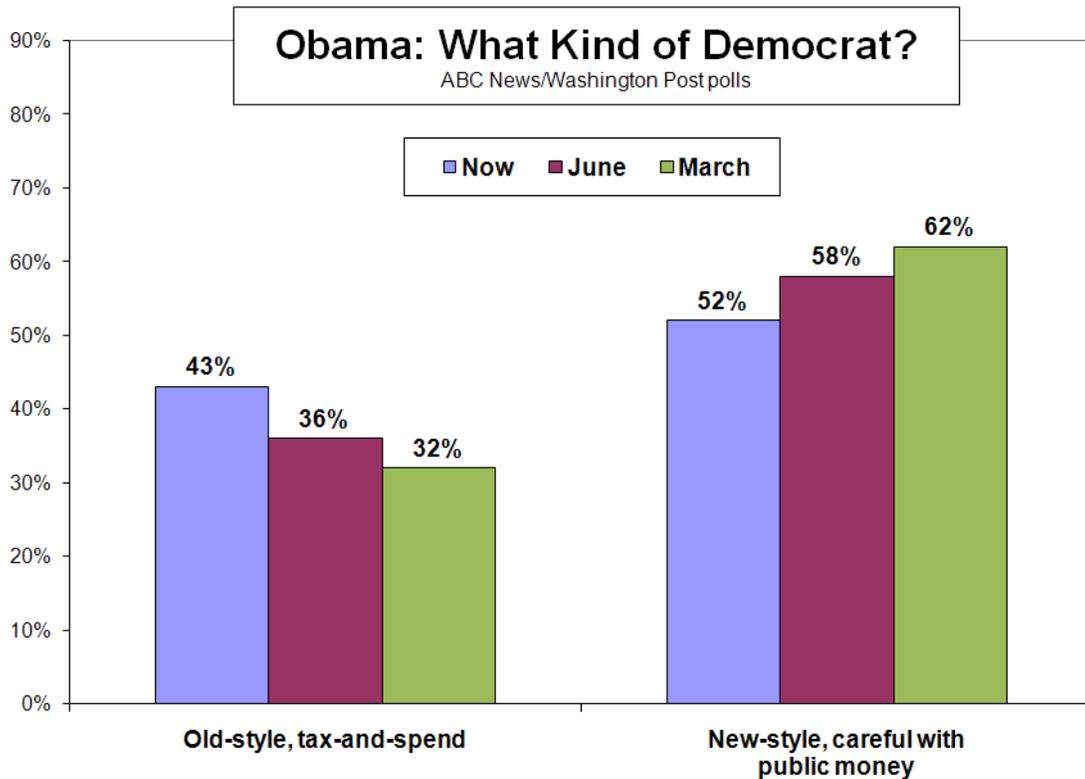
Obama is well off the top-tier of popularity at six months. In polls since Harry Truman, five presidents have been better-rated at about this point (Truman in the 80s; Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and the first president Bush in the 70s.) Four have been similarly rated as Obama is now – Nixon, Carter, Reagan and George W. Bush; two lower, Ford and Clinton. Six-month marks clearly don't predict long-term outcomes.

ECONOMY – The economy remains the 800-pound gorilla of national politics. Seventy-seven percent of Americans are worried about the economy's direction in the next few years and 63 percent are worried about their own family's finances – each below its peak, but still broadly negative. Moreover very few, 8 percent, say they've become better off financially (Reagan's famous benchmark) under Obama's presidency; 27 percent say they're doing worse.

But on what to do about the economy, public, and the president, look to be in a bind. On one hand, as noted, confidence that Obama's efforts in fact will improve the economy has lost 16 points since he took office. On the other, Americans by 55-40 percent now say it's more important to avoid bigger deficits than to increase stimulus spending – with deficit priority up 11 points, stimulus priority down 11, since January.

Indeed the public by 61-35 percent opposes increased stimulus spending beyond the nearly \$790 billion already committed – a dramatic turnaround from 70 percent support for the initial stimulus in January. And “strong” supporters then outnumbered strong opponents by more than 2-1; now it's strong opponents who predominate, 43 percent vs. 18 percent.

In another example of deficit fallout, barely over half, 52 percent, now see Obama as a “new-style Democrat who will be careful with the public’s money,” down from 62 percent in March. Forty-three percent instead see him as “an old-style, tax-and-spend Democrat,” up from 32 percent; his 30-point advantage has shrunk to 9. (Clinton, similarly, went from a 26-point to a 5-point advantage on this question in roughly his first six months.)



It all matters: Among people who say they’re worse off financially, 66 percent disapprove of Obama’s job performance overall, while just 29 percent approve. And among those still confident his efforts will improve the economy, 92 percent approve of his work in office; among those who lack such confidence, 78 percent disapprove.

That’s why, where confidence in his economic efforts goes, the president’s overall approval is very likely to follow. (Reagan’s not the only example – nor the most dire, since he had time to recover. The first President Bush saw his approval rating plummet by 36 points as result of the 1990-91 recession, costing him re-election.)

It’s telling, too, that Obama’s approval rating for handling the economy has declined not only by 12 points from its peak among Republicans and 11 points among independents, but also by 9 points from its peak among Democrats. And on the deficit, he’s lost 12 points from his peak approval among Democrats, as well as 9 points among Republicans and independents.

Confidence that Obama's efforts will improve the economy, further, has not only lost 26 points among Republicans since January, but also 20 points among independents. Among Democrats that's down by a milder 7 points.

One better bit for Obama is that he still escapes main blame for the economy's condition in the first place – albeit a bit less so. Sixty-two percent assign the Bush administration a great deal or good amount of blame “for inadequate regulation of the financial industry,” down 8 points from March. Separately, 32 percent assign blame to the Obama administration “for not doing enough to turn the economy around” – up by 6 points.

While the president doesn't currently come in for heavy criticism for his focus on top issues, 29 percent do say he's placing “too little” priority on the economy and more, 39 percent, say he's underfocused on the deficit. A quarter say he's spending too much time on health care, but nearly as many say too little.

ATTRIBUTES – For all the challenges on issues, personal appeal can provide the political cartilage that keeps a president popular – as both Reagan and Clinton demonstrated in their presidencies. That Obama retains in good measure – although, again, to a lessened degree.

Sixty-three percent say he “understands the problems of people like you,” more than ever said so about George W. Bush, albeit down significantly from 73 percent in April. Sixty-two percent say Obama's brought needed change to Washington – steady from April, but down from the 76 percent who expected him to do so at the start of his term. And 71 percent see him as a strong leader, slightly off its peak, 77 percent, three months ago.

Some of these changes represent the inevitable return to Earth of a president who took office with such high expectations, particularly in comparison to his deeply unpopular predecessor. But others – chiefly, declining confidence in his approach to the economy – hold the portent of difficulties ahead.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone July 15-18, 2009, among a random national sample of 1,001 adults, including landline and cell-phone-only respondents. Results for the full sample have a 3.5-point error margin; click [here](#) for a detailed description of sampling error. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

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

Media contact: Cathie Levine, (212) 456-4934.

Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

1. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or somewhat?

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	59	38	22	37	9	28	4
6/21/09	65	36	29	31	10	22	4
4/24/09	69	42	27	26	8	18	4
3/29/09	66	40	26	29	9	20	5
2/22/09	68	43	25	25	8	17	7

2. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Obama is handling [ITEM]? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or somewhat?

7/18/09 - Summary Table*

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	op.
a. The economy	52	29	23	46	10	35	3
b. Health care	49	25	24	44	11	33	7
c. The federal budget deficit	43	19	24	49	11	38	8
d. Unemployment	52	26	26	42	11	31	6
e. The situation in Afghanistan	62	33	29	30	13	17	8

*Full sample asked item a; half sample asked items b-c; other half sample asked items d-e.

Trend where available:

a. The economy

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	52	29	23	46	10	35	3
6/21/09	56	28	28	41	13	27	3
4/24/09	58	31	28	38	13	25	4
3/29/09	60	34	25	38	12	26	3
2/22/09	60	NA	NA	34	NA	NA	6

b. Health care

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	49	25	24	44	11	33	7
6/21/09	53	27	26	39	10	29	9
4/24/09	57	NA	NA	29	NA	NA	13

c. The federal budget deficit

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	43	19	24	49	11	38	8
6/21/09	48	22	26	48	13	35	5
4/24/09	51	NA	NA	43	NA	NA	7
3/29/09	52	NA	NA	43	NA	NA	5

d. No trend.

e. The situation in Afghanistan

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	62	33	29	30	13	17	8
4/24/09	63	NA	NA	26	NA	NA	11

3. held for release.

4. Do you approve or disapprove of the way (ITEM) are doing their job?

7/18/09 - Summary Table

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
a. The Democrats in Congress	47	48	5
b. The Republicans in Congress	36	58	6

Trend:

a. The Democrats in Congress

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
7/18/09	47	48	5
4/24/09	45	49	6
2/22/09	50	44	6
7/13/08	35	57	8
2/1/08	39	54	7
12/9/07	40	53	6
11/1/07	36	58	6
9/30/07	38	57	5
7/21/07	46	51	2
6/1/07	44	49	6
4/15/07	54	44	2
10/8/06	48	50	3
5/15/06	39	58	4
11/2/05	41	54	5
6/5/05	42	56	3
6/6/99	51	42	7
3/14/99	51	42	7
7/8/97	45	49	6
4/5/95	36	60	4
10/31/94	39	53	8
10/23/94	36	59	5
9/11/94	41	53	6

b. The Republicans in Congress

	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
7/18/09	36	58	6
4/24/09	30	64	6
2/22/09	38	56	6
7/13/08	25	69	6
2/1/08	30	63	7
12/9/07	32	63	5
11/1/07	32	63	6
9/30/07	29	67	4
7/21/07	34	64	2
6/1/07	36	58	6
4/15/07	39	59	2
10/8/06	35	63	2
5/15/06	33	64	3
11/2/05	35	61	4
6/5/05	42	56	2
6/6/99	41	52	7
3/14/99	40	56	4
7/8/97	40	54	6
9/15/96 RV	46	48	6

6/30/96	38	56	6
4/5/95	45	50	5
10/31/94	33	59	7
10/23/94	31	64	5
9/11/94	35	59	6

5. Who do you trust to do a better job handling [ITEM] - (Obama) or the (Republicans in Congress)?

7/18/09 - Summary Table*

	Obama	Reps	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
a. The economy	56	33	1	9	2
b. Health care reform	54	34	1	10	1
c. The federal budget deficit	54	35	*	9	2

*Full sample asked item a; half sample asked item b; other half sample asked item c.

Trend where available:

a. The economy

	Obama	Reps	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	56	33	1	9	2
6/21/09	55	31	2	9	2
4/24/09	61	24	2	11	2
3/29/09	58	25	1	14	2
2/22/09	61	26	1	9	3

Compare to:

G.W. Bush or the Democrats in Congress:

	Bush	Dems	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
6/1/07	36	54	1	6	2
2/25/07	36	56	1	6	2
1/19/07	32	60	1	4	2
12/11/06	34	58	1	5	2
1/18/04	43	50	1	4	3
4/30/03	51	41	2	2	3
11/6/01	51	36	5	4	5
9/9/01	44	50	1	3	2
7/30/01	47	46	1	4	1
6/3/01	44	46	2	6	2

Clinton or the Republicans in Congress:*

	Clinton	Reps	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
1/23/96	51	34	11	3	2
10/30/95	38	50	9	1	2
10/1/95	44	44	8	2	3
7/17/95	42	51	4	1	2
3/19/95	43	47	7	1	2
1/4/95	34	56	3	1	5
12/20/94	36	59	NA	NA	5
11/14/93	45	37	3	12	3
8/8/93	48	35	1	13	3
6/28/93	45	40	1	10	4
4/26/93	59	29	4	7	1

G.H.W. Bush or the Democrats in Congress:*

	Bush	Dems	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
3/11/92	37	36	1	20	7
3/8/92	32	44	3	14	6
2/2/92	40	44	1	9	5
1/29/92	38	41	2	13	5
12/15/91	36	46	2	12	4

* "on the economy"

b. Health care reform

	Obama	Reps	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	54	34	1	10	1
6/21/09	55	27	2	11	4

c. The federal budget deficit

	Obama	Reps	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	54	35	*	9	2
6/21/09	56	30	2	9	2

6. Do you think Obama is placing (too much) of a priority on [ITEM], (too little) or about the right amount?

7/18/09 - Summary Table

	Too much	Too little	About the right amount	No opinion
a. The economy	9	29	58	3
b. The federal budget deficit	13	39	44	4
c. Health care	25	21	51	3

7. How confident are you that Obama's economic program will improve the economy - very confident, fairly confident, not very confident or not confident at all?

	---- Confident ----			----- Not confident -----			No opinion
	NET	Very	Fairly	NET	Not very	Not at all	
7/18/09	56	22	34	43	17	26	1
3/29/09	64	23	41	35	18	17	1
1/16/09	72	23	48	28	17	11	*

Compare to: Reagan

4/12/83	52	13	38	48	24	23	1
1/22/83	45	13	32	53	28	25	2
10/11/82 LV	49	12	37	48	23	25	3

8. Which of these do you think is more important right now - (increasing federal spending to try to improve the economy, even if it sharply increases the federal budget deficit); or (avoiding a big increase in the federal budget deficit, even if it means not increasing federal spending to try to improve the economy)?

	Increasing spending	Avoiding deficit	No opinion
7/18/09	40	55	5
3/29/09	49	47	5
1/16/09	51	44	4

9. How much blame do you think [ITEM] deserves for the country's economic situation - a great deal, a good amount, only some or hardly any?

7/18/09 - Summary Table

- a. The Bush administration, for inadequate regulation of the financial industry
- b. The Obama administration, for not doing enough to turn the economy around

	- Grt deal/Gd amt-			-- Some/Hardly any/None ---				
	NET	Great deal	Good amt	NET	Only some	Hardly any	None (vol.)	No opinion
a. Bush	62	42	20	36	23	11	1	2
b. Obama	32	14	17	66	28	34	4	2

Trend:

- a. The Bush administration, for inadequate regulation of the financial industry

	- Grt deal/Gd amt-			-- Some/Hardly any/None ---				
	NET	Great deal	Good amt	NET	Only some	Hardly any	None (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	62	42	20	36	23	11	1	2
3/29/09	70	47	23	29	21	7	1	2

- b. The Obama administration, for not doing enough to turn the economy around

	- Grt deal/Gd amt-			-- Some/Hardly any/None ---				
	NET	Great deal	Good amt	NET	Only some	Hardly any	None (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	32	14	17	66	28	34	4	2
3/29/09	26	13	13	72	27	39	6	2

10. Would you support or oppose additional federal spending above the 787 billion dollars already set aside to try to stimulate the economy? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?

	----- Support -----			----- Oppose -----			No opinion
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	35	18	17	61	18	43	3

Compare to:

Would you support or oppose new federal spending of about 800 billion dollars on tax cuts, construction projects, energy, education, and health care to try to stimulate the economy? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?

	----- Support -----			----- Oppose -----			No opinion
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
1/16/09	70	43	27	27	9	17	3
12/14/08*	65	37	28	32	13	18	3

* "up to 700 billion dollars on construction projects and other programs"

11. Would you say you, yourself are better off financially than you were in when Obama became president, not as well off, or in about the same shape as then financially?

	Better off	Not as well off	About the same	No opinion
7/18/09	8	27	64	*

Compare to:

G.W. Bush				
10/5/04 LV	30	30	40	1
10/29/03	22	27	50	1
9/13/03	21	30	49	*
8/11/03	17	25	58	1
Clinton				
6/11/00	34	14	50	2
7/19/98	30	15	52	3
3/1/98	32	9	57	1
6/23/96	29	22	49	0
2/27/94	12	17	71	*
G.H.W. Bush				
8/9/92	22	32	45	1
6/7/92	19	32	49	*
3/11/92	20	33	46	1
2/2/92	19	31	49	*
10/21/91	20	27	53	1
3/4/91	19	18	63	1
Reagan				
1/16/89	42	18	39	1
1/18/87	37	23	40	1
9/8/86	41	20	39	1

12. How do you feel about [ITEM] - very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not worried at all?

7/18/09 - Summary Table*

	----- Worried ----			----- Not worried ----			No
	NET	Very	Smwt.	NET	Not too	At all	opin.
a. The direction of the nation's economy over the next few years	77	36	42	22	16	6	*
b. Your own family's financial situation	63	23	41	37	25	12	0

*Half sample asked item a; other half sample asked item b.

Trend:

a. The direction of the nation's economy over the next few years

	----- Worried ----			----- Not worried ----			No
	NET	Very	Smwt.	NET	Not too	At all	opinion
7/18/09	77	36	42	22	16	6	*
1/16/09	81	35	46	18	15	4	*
10/19/08 LV	85	44	42	14	9	5	1
10/11/08	88	48	40	11	8	3	1
9/22/08	79	40	39	17	13	5	3
1/5/03	67	27	40	31	22	10	1
11/4/02 LV	76	34	42	23	17	6	1
11/3/02 LV	75	33	42	24	17	7	1
11/2/02 LV	73	32	41	26	19	8	1
10/27/02	75	27	48	23	16	7	2

b. Your own family's financial situation

7/18/09	63	23	41	37	25	12	0
---------	----	----	----	----	----	----	---

1/16/09	70	27	43	30	20	10	*
10/19/08 LV	66	24	43	33	21	12	*
10/11/08	67	23	43	33	22	11	1
9/22/08	60	22	38	40	26	14	*

13. Thinking about health care, one proposal to insure nearly everyone would require all Americans to have health insurance or pay a penalty on their income tax, excluding those with lower incomes. It would require most employers to offer health coverage or pay a fee. There would be a government-run plan to compete with private insurers. And income taxes on people earning more than 280-thousand dollars a year would be raised to help fund the program. Taken together, would you support or oppose this plan? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?

	----- Support -----			----- Oppose -----			No
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	opinion
7/18/09	54	32	23	43	10	33	3

14. Please tell me whether the following statement applies to Obama, or not?

7/18/09 - Summary Table

	Yes	No	No opinion
a. He understands the problems of people like you	63	35	1
b. He is a strong leader	71	27	2
c. He has brought needed change to Washington	62	35	3
d. held for release.			

Trend:

a. He understands the problems of people like you

	Yes	No	No opinion
7/18/09	63	35	1
4/24/09	73	25	1
1/16/09	72	24	4

b. He is a strong leader

7/18/09	71	27	2
4/24/09	77	22	2
1/16/09	72	18	10

c. He has brought needed change to Washington

7/18/09	62	35	3
4/24/09	63	34	2
1/16/09*	76	22	3

*"will bring"

15. Which of these statements comes closer to your view: (Beneath it all, Obama is an old-style, tax-and-spend Democrat) OR (Obama is a new-style Democrat who will be careful with the public's money).

	Old-style	New-style	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
7/18/09	43	52	3	2
6/21/09	36	58	4	3
3/29/09	32	62	3	3

Compare to: Clinton

5/22/96	44	50	NA	6
1/29/95	40	54	4	2
1/4/95	48	45	3	3
2/27/94	40	52	6	3
1/23/94	40	49	6	5
11/14/93	48	44	5	2
8/8/93	45	50	3	2
6/28/93	45	50	3	2
5/23/93	48	48	2	2
4/26/93	37	59	3	1
2/28/93	35	61	3	1

16-28 held for release.

END