

AP Poll: Americans high on Obama, direction of US

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Editor's Note: What do you think about Obama's first 100 days and the future?

(AP) - For the first time in years, more Americans than not say the country is headed in the right direction, a sign that Barack Obama has used the first 100 days of his presidency to lift the public's mood and inspire hopes for a brighter future. Intensely worried about their personal finances and medical expenses, Americans nonetheless appear realistic about the time Obama might need to turn things around, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll. It shows most Americans consider their new president to be a strong, ethical and empathetic leader who is working to change Washington.

Nobody knows how long the honeymoon will last, but Obama has clearly transformed the yes-we-can spirit of his candidacy into a tool of governance. His ability to inspire confidence — Obama's second book is titled "The Audacity of Hope" — has thus far buffered the president against the harsh political realities of two wars, a global economic meltdown and countless domestic challenges. "He presents a very positive outlook," said Cheryl Wetherington, 35, an independent voter who runs a chocolate shop in Gardner, Kan. "He's very well-spoken and very vocal about what direction should be taken."

But other AP-GfK findings could signal trouble for Obama as he approaches his 100th day in office, April 29. While there is evidence that people feel more optimistic about the economy, 65 percent said it's difficult for them and their families to get ahead. More than one-third

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know of a family member who recently lost a job. More than 90 percent of Americans consider the economy an important issue, the highest ever in AP polling. Nearly 80 percent believe that the rising federal debt will hurt future generations, and Obama is getting mixed reviews at best for his handling of the issue. And yet, the percentage of Americans saying the country is headed in the right direction rose to 48 percent, up from 40 percent in February. Forty-four percent say the nation is on the wrong track.

Not since January 2004, shortly after the capture of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, has an AP survey found more "right direction" than "wrong direction" respondents. So far, Obama has defied the odds by producing a sustained trend toward optimism. It began with his election. But he is aware that his political prospects are directly linked to such numbers. If at the end of his term the public is no more assured that Washington is competent and accountable and that the nation is at least on the right track, his re-election prospects will be doubtful. "I will be held accountable," Obama said a few weeks into his presidency. "You know, I've got four years. ... If I don't have this done in three years, then there's going to be a one-term proposition."

The AP-GfK poll suggests that 64 percent of the public approves of Obama's job performance, down just slightly from 67 percent in February. President George W. Bush's approval ratings hovered in the high 50s after his first 100 days in office. But Obama also has become a somewhat polarizing figure, with just 24 percent of Republicans approving of his performance — down from 33 percent in February. Obama campaigned on a promise — just as Bush had — to end the party-first mindset that breeds gridlock in Washington.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

Obama is not the first president who sought to tap the deep well of American optimism — the never-say-die spirit that Americans like to see in themselves. Even as he briefly closed the nation's banks, Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke in the first days of his presidency of the "confidence and courage" needed to fix the U.S. economy. "Together we cannot fail," he declared. "When Obama came in," said D.T. Brown, 39, a Mount Vernon, Ill., radio show host who voted against Obama, "it was just a breath of fresh air."

Others said their newfound optimism had nothing to do with Obama, but rather with an era of personal responsibility they believe has come with the economic meltdown. "I think people are beginning to turn in that direction and realize that there's not always going to be somebody to catch them when things fall down," said Dwight Hageman, 66, a retired welder from Newberg, Ore., who voted against Obama. The AP-GfK Poll was conducted April 16-20 by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Media. It involved telephone interviews on landline and cell phones with 1,000 adults nationwide. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Associated Press News Survey Specialist Dennis Junius and AP writer Christine Simmons contributed to this report.

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