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National UMass Amherst Poll Finds Views on the Economy, Immigration Weighing Down President Biden's Re-election Bid

The survey also finds that disapproval of the president's handling of the Israeli-Hamas war, including from those on the left, threatens his chances this November

Topline results and crosstabs for the poll can be found at www.umass.edu/poll

AMHERST, Mass. – Persistently dim views of the national economy – even in the face of low unemployment, bullish stock markets and easing inflation – continue to be the most serious threat to President Joe Biden's re-election bid this November, according to a new national University of Massachusetts Amherst Poll.

In addition to economic issues, the new survey of 1,064 respondents conducted Jan. 25-30 found that Biden faces further vulnerability on the issues of immigration, crime and the Israel-Hamas war.

"The downward spiral that has come to define the Biden presidency continues, as a paltry 39% of voters express approval of the job that President Biden is doing, down five percentage points since June of 2023," says Tatishe Nteta, provost professor of political science at UMass Amherst and director of the poll. "Among those who view the Biden's job performance poorly, the president's age, his performance concerning the border crisis, and inflation and the economy all emerge as the most frequently mentioned justifications for the low approval ratings. With the specter of a rematch with former President Trump on the horizon, Biden will need to work to bolster his low approval numbers or face the prospect of becoming a one term president."

"When Americans perceive that the economy is poor, they take it out on the president," says Jesse Rhodes, professor of political science at UMass Amherst and co-director of the poll. "So, Americans' deep frustration with high prices is very bad news for Joe Biden. Going into an election year, an astounding 57% of Americans disapprove of the job Biden is doing. And Biden's approval is deeply underwater with every group except for Democrats, liberals, African Americans and those with a post-graduate degree – the core of his electoral coalition. Unfortunately for Biden, he's going to need a much broader coalition of support to win the presidency in 2024. At this point, the only consolation for Biden is that Trump is almost as unpopular as he is."

"Typically, when the economy improves, approval of the president goes up," says Raymond La Raja, professor of political science at UMass Amherst and co-director of the poll says. "But since June, Biden's approval numbers have gone down across the board with all demographic groups, and even among Democrats. The Biden campaign will hope this is the low water mark, and people will start to perceive the benefits of an improved economy as the election approaches. We think these numbers will improve as the campaign heats up and Democratic voter loyalties kick in."

"A huge disconnect persists between positive economic indicators and public perceptions of the economy," says Alexander Theodoridis, associate professor of political science at UMass Amherst and co-director of the poll. "The U.S. has actually done better than most advanced countries in weathering economic storms the last few years (including global inflation), but you wouldn't know it looking at poll numbers. Only 14% of voters recognize that we have had less inflation than most peer nations and only 21% realize that we have enjoyed more growth than our peers. Even substantial numbers of Democrats are surprisingly oblivious to Biden's objective success in navigating challenging post-COVID economic waters."

"A big reason for Americans' frustration with the economy is that many – 41% – believe that inflation in the U.S. has been worse than in other advanced countries," Rhodes explains. "Although the inflation rate has declined noticeably over the past year, the very high inflation from 2021 and 2022 is now baked into prices, particularly in areas such as housing, food and fuel costs. Americans are feeling the pain of high prices in these areas, and that's why they perceive the economy so negatively despite low unemployment and positive wage growth. Indeed, one-third of Americans report that they had difficulty buying food at some point over the past year, and more than 30% say they had problems making minimum payments on their debt. Importantly, inflation also causes frustrations for relatively well-to-do Americans, as nearly 40% say that they had difficulty saving for college or retirement, and more than half say that they were not able to save for things like vacations or a new car. All of these things spell frustration about the economy."

Nteta notes, however, that should public perception of the economy match its actual performance, the president may well still be calling the White House home this time next year.

"As economists tout the nation's recovery from the economic calamities associated with the pandemic, pointing to the low unemployment rate, a record growth in the stock market, and a drop in inflation, the public is slowly coming to view the economy in more positive light with 30% of the public viewing the economy as 'excellent' or 'good' – up from 21% who held these views in June of 2023," Nteta says. "Among those who view the national economy in a positive light, we find that these economic indicators – particularly low levels of unemployment and the booming stock market – are most frequently mentioned as justifications for these rosy assessments of the nation's economy. Whether these optimistic views of the economy will assist Biden and the Democratic Party in the 2024 election is still to be seen, but the Biden campaign is likely

buoyed by not only these economic numbers but the public's increasing recognition of the nation's improved economy."

Immigration, the Israeli-Hamas conflict and other issues

As news developed over the past week of a potential bipartisan deal on immigration in the Senate – and the immediate rejection of such a deal by House Republicans, including Speaker Mike Johnson – the new poll found that immigration remains a significant drag on the president's re-election chances. Just 26% of respondents say Biden is handling the issue somewhat or very well, while 67% said he's not handling it well, including 47% who said he's not handling it well at all.

"Two big policy issues loom for Biden's re-election among voters – inflation and border control," La Raja says. "Voters who are persuadable may shift on issues related to inflation since that appears increasingly under control. But he will remain highly vulnerable on migrants crossing the border illegally without some dramatic change in events or policy."

Biden also faces tensions from within his own party over the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. Only 31% of the survey's respondents said that Biden is handling the issue in the Middle East well, while 59% said that he is not handling the situation well.

"With no end in sight to the Israeli siege of Gaza, a siege prompted by the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas, a reported 27,000 Palestinian residents of Gaza have been killed by the Israeli Defense Force and millions have been displaced from their homes," Nteta says. "In response to the Israeli government's continual reluctance to cease their military offensive in Gaza, many in the world community have called on the United Nations to declare Israel's actions as tantamount to genocide. We found that Americans are evenly split on this issue, with 50% viewing Israel's actions as genocidal while 50% push back against this declaration. Like many issues, both domestic and international, the question of whether the Israelis are committing genocide has become a reflection of the nation's partisan, gender, racial and generational divisions as majorities of Democrats, progressives, people of color, women and young people believe that genocide is being committed while Republicans, conservatives, whites, men and older Americans oppose this notion. Time will tell whether the international community will declare that the state of Israel has committed genocide against the Palestinian people, but in the U.S. any declaration will be likely be met with derision by some and enthusiasm by others."

"Biden gets the highest praise for creating jobs and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict," La Raja says, as 42% of respondents said Biden has handled each of those issues well. "However, majorities of voters have not been impressed with Biden on other issues. Except for core Democratic voters, the American public is telling Biden they are not impressed, despite the economy bouncing back and paychecks rising for many."

"A clear majority of Americans – 58% – say Biden has fallen short of their expectations," La Raja summarizes. "This is the highest number of disappointed Americans we have

recorded in three years, and 10 points lower than a year ago. Ironically, Biden did not create big expectations in his first election. He campaigned on bringing stability back to the White House. But as experienced by many past presidents, events have outstripped plans for normalcy."

The lone bright spot for the president may be that he is not a member of Congress – as just over one in four of the poll's respondents approve of the job being done by the nation's legislative branch.

"How low can you go?" Nteta asks. "The 118th U.S. Congress is shaping up to be one of the least productive in the history of the United States, with only 34 bills to date becoming law. Rather than working to improve the lives of Americans, Congress has spent weeks contemplating who will replace former Speaker Kevin McCarthy, removing Rep. George Santos, and debating whether to impeach President Biden. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the approval ratings of Congress experienced further decline from an already low 28% in June to 26% in January. If the Congress continues to fail to move on the pressing issues facing the nation from immigration to inflation, it is likely that their approval numbers will continue their precipitously decline."

Methodology

This [University of Massachusetts Amherst Poll](#) of 1,064 respondents nationwide was conducted by YouGov Jan. 25-30. YouGov interviewed 1,064 total respondents none of whom were matched out to produce the final dataset. The unmatched cases were weighted to a sampling frame using propensity scores. The sampling frame is a politically representative "modeled frame" of U.S. adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote.

The unmatched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, region and home ownership status. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame, and then post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice, as well as a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories) and education (4-categories), to produce the final weight.

The margin of error of this poll is 3.7%.

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