

## **Public Optimism Hits a 36-year Low In Views of the ‘System of Government’**

Optimism in the country’s system of government has dropped to a new low in polling back 36 years, and the public’s sense that America is the greatest nation on Earth, while still high, has fallen significantly from its level a generation ago.

Both results in the latest ABC News/Yahoo! News poll, in advance of next week’s midterm elections, suggest that public disenchantment extends beyond its economic and political roots to encompass broader views of the country’s governance and American exceptionalism alike.

The bottom hasn’t fallen out of national pride: Seventy-five percent call the United States “the greatest country in the world.” But that’s down from 88 percent when the same question was asked in 1984. And nearly a quarter, 23 percent, now take the alternative, saying America used to be the greatest country, “but isn’t any more.” That’s up from 9 percent.

Optimism about the system has taken an even bigger hit in this poll, produced for ABC and Yahoo! News by [Langer Research Associates](#). Back in 1974 – shortly after Richard Nixon’s resignation in the Watergate scandal – 55 percent of Americans were optimistic about “our system of government and how well it works.” Today just 33 percent say so, the fewest in nearly a dozen measurements across the decades. (None, though, was done in the early ’90s, the last time economic disgruntlement was as high as it is now.)

**BETTER NEWS** – There’s better news on two fronts. First, while optimism is down, pessimism about the workings of government hasn’t risen; 20 percent are pessimistic, about the average in those 36 years of polls – and it peaked much higher, at 28 percent, in 1996. Instead more now are “uncertain” about the system and how it’s working, a new high, 46 percent.

The question, which originated with the Roper Organization, admittedly is double-barreled; is it the system that’s the problem, or how it’s working? More of the latter, apparently. In a new follow-up, this poll asked pessimistic or uncertain Americans what the problem is – the system itself, or the people in government who are running it. Answer: The people running the government, not the system itself, by a 3-1 margin, 74 percent to 24 percent.

Netted, this means that just under half of Americans, 49 percent, are pessimistic or uncertain about the system and how it’s working, and mainly blame the people running it. Sixteen percent are pessimistic or uncertain and blame the system itself. And nearly all of the rest, 33 percent, are optimistic about the system.

While a plurality perceives a problem with the people running the government, there’s also room for improvement in the public’s own awareness of political candidates. Thirty-five percent of

Americans concede that they don't know enough about their own choice of candidates to say how many of them, if any, "share your view of what needs to be done to improve things in this country." Nineteen percent say there are a lot or good amount of such candidates; the plurality, 46 percent, says there are few or none. (See separate analysis here.)

**GROUPS** – Age is a significant factor in views of the country's greatness. Eighty-three percent of adults 50 and up call the United States the greatest country in the world; that declines to 68 percent of those under 50. (It's 74 percent among people in their 40s, 69 percent among those in their 30s and 61 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds. These differences by decade, though, don't reach statistical significance, given the sample sizes.)

Under-30s, moreover, are more apt than their elders to be pessimistic about the system and how well it works, 28 percent vs. 18 percent.

There's an income gap as well, perhaps reflecting differences between those who have and haven't achieved relative prosperity. The share of people who call America the greatest country ranges from 85 percent of those with household incomes over \$75,000 to 71 percent of those with annual incomes less than \$25,000.

There aren't significant partisan differences in views of the country's greatness – three-quarters of Democrats and independents alike, and eight in 10 Republicans, call the United States the world's greatest country. But optimism about the system and how it works is higher among Democrats than it is among Republicans and independents. And, perhaps helped by the presence of the first African-American president, pessimism is notably low among blacks (5 percent, vs. 22 percent among whites).

Optimism about the system, naturally, is higher (39 percent) among people who think America still is the greatest nation than it is among those who think it's no longer the greatest (14 percent optimistic). (Perhaps reflecting reflexive national pride, the question, originated by NBC News in 1984, doesn't include an option of saying the country never was the world's greatest – only that it still is, or used to be but isn't now.)

Finally, partisan differences are sharpest on the question of what's to blame for problems in the way the system of government is working – the system, or the people running it. About two-thirds of Democrats and independents say it's the people. But this jumps to 90 percent of Republicans – the ones who, as previous polling has shown, are most dissatisfied with the way the government's operating now, and the most eager to change it in next week's election.

**METHODOLOGY** – This ABC News/Yahoo News! poll was conducted Oct. 13-20, 2010, among a random national sample of 1,025 adults. Respondents were selected using an address-based sample design. Households for which a phone number could be ascertained were contacted by phone; others were contacted by mail and asked to complete the survey via a toll-free inbound phone number or the internet. See details [here](#). Results for the full sample have a 4-point error margin. Click [here](#) for a detailed description of sampling error.

This survey was produced by [Langer Research Associates](#) of New York, N.Y, with sampling, data collection and tabulation by SSRS of Media, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

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

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Full results follow.

1. Which statement comes closer to your feelings about the United States: (the United States used to be the greatest country in the world, but isn't anymore), or (the United States is still the greatest country in the world)?

	Used to be	Still is	No opinion
10/20/10	23	75	3
6/26/84*	9	88	3

\*NBC News

2. As far as the future is concerned, thinking about our system of government and how well it works - is this something you feel generally optimistic about, generally pessimistic about, or uncertain about?

	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Uncertain	No opinion
10/20/10	33	20	46	1
1/13/08*	44	23	33	1
2/07/99**	54	19	27	1
3/10/96	43	28	28	1
2/26/83***	51	21	27	1
2/28/81	51	21	26	1
2/24/79	49	22	26	1
8/27/77	47	21	29	3
2/26/77	57	14	26	2
8/30/75	45	24	29	3
8/31/74	55	15	27	3

\*USA Today/Gallup, \*\*CNN/Gallup, \*\*\*Roper

3. (IF PESSIMISTIC OR UNCERTAIN) Which of these do you think is the main problem - the (system of government itself), or the (people in government who are running it)?

	System	People	No opinion
10/20/10	24	74	2

4. Thinking about the candidates that you personally will have a chance to vote for in the midterm elections next month, how many of them do you feel share your view of what needs to be done to improve things in this country: are there a lot of such candidates, a good amount, just a few, none at all - or don't you know enough about them to say?

	-A lot/good amt.-			----Few/none----			Don't know
	NET	A lot	Some	NET	Few	None	enough
10/20/10	19	5	13	46	36	10	35

\*\*\*END\*\*\*