

President Obama Is Not A Polarizing Figure

Contributed by Harris Interactive
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Majorities believe he is trying to put the country back on track and to bring about needed changes – but that he has not done much yet, has not lived up to his campaign promises and is spending too much

A new Harris Poll finds that most Americans have both good and bad feelings about President Obama.

On the one hand, most people believe that he is trying to put the country back on track (61%); and to bring about much needed change (60%); that he has made other countries feel better about this country (57%); that he provides a fresh outlook with new ideas (56%); is open, honest and trustworthy (54%); and is working for the people's best interests (51%).

At the same time, majorities also feel that he hasn't done much for us yet (61%); that he is spending too much and creating too much debt (61%); that he has not lived up to his campaign promises (60%); and spends too much time talking with not enough action (57%).

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll of 2,576 adults surveyed online between January 18 and 25, 2010 by Harris Interactive.

The statements, with which we asked people to agree or disagree, were all derived from spontaneous replies to an open-ended question we asked about President Obama in another recent Harris Poll (November 2009).

While majorities of adults hold these positive and negative views of the president, one issue divides them; just over four in ten (43%) believe he is not changing things fast enough but almost as many (38%) think he is changing things too fast.

Unsurprisingly, Republicans are more likely to agree with the negative statements, and the Democrats to agree with the positive statements. A 47% plurality of Democrats think he is not changing things fast enough, while 60% of Republicans see he is moving too fast.

However, substantial minorities of Republicans agree with the positive statements about the president, and substantial minorities of Democrats agree with the critical statements.

While Independents tend to have opinions that are not very different than those of all adults, they are slightly more critical of the president for not having done much yet (67%), for spending too much (69%), and for not living up to his campaign promises (68%)

Education strongly correlated with more positive opinions of Obama

The more education people have had, the more likely they are to have positive opinions of President Obama.

For example, many more of those with post-graduate degrees than those with no college education believe the president is working for the best interests of the people (by 66% to 45%); that he is open, honest and trustworthy (by 70% to 49%); that he is trying to bring about much needed change (by 72% to 57%); and that he has made other countries feel better about the United States (by 76% to 51%).

So what?

1. These results show that, unlike President Clinton and President Bush, President Obama is not a strongly polarizing figure. Substantial minorities of Republicans agree with some of the positive statements about him, while substantial numbers of Democrats agree with most of the criticisms.

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This suggests that attitudes to the president might change a great deal – up or down – in the future.

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2. The correlation between education and positive attitudes to the president recalls Adlai Stevenson's reply, when told that most "thinking people" would vote for him, that he needed to win the votes of a majority.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States January 18 to 25, 2010 among 2,576 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates.

These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population.

Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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By Humphrey Taylor, Chairman, The Harris Poll, Harris Interactive

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Known widely for the Harris Poll and for pioneering innovative research methodologies, Harris offers expertise in a wide range of industries including healthcare, technology, public affairs, energy, telecommunications, financial services, insurance, media, retail, restaurant, and consumer package goods.

Serving clients in over 215 countries and territories through our North American, European, and Asian offices and a network of independent market research firms, Harris specializes in delivering research solutions that help us "and our clients" stay ahead of what's next.

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