

Survey: The American Dream

Survey holds out some hope for ohio dems, provides insight into make-up, future of the american dream

The "enthusiasm gap" between Republicans and Democrats widely reported by the national news media in recent weeks is not apparent in the results of the latest on-line public opinion survey conducted by the Center for Working-Class Studies (CWCS) at Youngstown State University. Results of the poll, the fourth in a series conducted by the Center, were released today.

According to CWCS co-director Dr. John Russo, respondents indicated that they believe the 2010 election is more important than other mid-terms and that they are more likely to cast ballots on November 2 than in years past. "If there is an enthusiasm gap among Democrats it's not evident in these results," Dr. Russo said. "Those who participated in the survey were overwhelmingly Democratic and they clearly sense that there is a lot at stake next Tuesday. Their level of concern could make a difference in tight elections like the race for Ohio governor and the contest for Ohio's Sixth District Congressional seat."

While primarily focused on the policy issues that are dominating the debate and the commercial airwaves in the run-up to the election, Dr. Russo noted that the responses to a series of questions about the American Dream may be the most interesting data collected via the survey. "We hear a lot about the American Dream during campaigns," he said. "Every candidate says he or she is for it—let's face it, who could be against it—but it's always been an ephemeral concept, so we decided to ask voters what it means to them, whether they believe they have achieved it, and whether they think it will be attainable by future generations."

Here is a snapshot of some of the most significant results of the survey:

- Democrats are extremely enthusiastic about the upcoming election with 82% saying they are certain to vote, a 12% increase over past mid-term elections;
- Ted Strickland leads John Kasich by 70% among Mahoning Valley voters;
- At 69%, President Obama's approval rating remains unchanged since the last CWCS survey was conducted in February 2010—that is 19% below his rating after his first 100 days in office;
- Congress is extremely unpopular with more than 60% saying they disapprove or strongly disapprove of their performance;
- 88% believe the U.S. economy is bad or very bad;
- 64% believe it will stay that way for two years or more

Following is a more in-depth analysis of some survey results:

The American Dream

Question 25 asked respondents if they believed in the concept of the American Dream. Those who identified themselves as belonging to the working class were less likely to believe in the American Dream than respondents as a whole:

Do you believe in the concept of the American Dream? Overall Working Class		
Yes	68%	57%
No	23%	32%
No Opinion/Refused	9%	11%

In Question 26 we asked those participating in the survey to identify the "essential components" of the American Dream. Economic considerations topped the list of all respondents and the working class. Being able to earn enough income to support a family and having a good stable job were the elements of the American Dream most often identified by both groups. Home ownership, while viewed as important, was not among the top five responses given by either group.

What are the essential components of the Dream? Overall Working Class		
Earn enough income to support a family	91%	89%
Have a good stable job	85%	86%
Make enough to save for retirement	81%	86%
Own a home	71%	79%

We next asked if participants if they believed they had achieved the American Dream. While a majority said "yes," a substantial portion also said that while they had achieved the "Dream" they felt it was slipping away. When combined with those who believed they would not achieve it, nearly 41% of all respondents could be characterized as pessimistic about their prospects for the future. Those in the working class were even less optimistic with a combined 56% stating that they dream was slipping away or could not be achieved.

Have you achieved the American Dream? Overall Working Class		
Yes	34%	22%
Yes, but it is slipping away	24%	23%
No	17%	33%
No, but I believe I will in my lifetime	16%	17%
No opinion/Refused	7%	5%

Finally, we asked those respondents who had children if they believed their sons and daughters would realize the American Dream. Here the response varied widely

between all respondents and those in the working class, with the larger group expressing a great deal more optimism for the future. Less than half of the working class respondents believe their children will achieve the American Dream.

Will your children achieve the American Dream? Overall Working Class

Yes	64%	46%
No	35%	32%
No opinion/Refused	1%	22%

President Obama

The number of respondents who said they approve or strongly approve of President Obama's performance in office remains virtually unchanged since the CWCS conducted its previous poll in February of 2010. At that time 69% said they approved of the job he was doing with 15% saying they strongly approved. Today 71% say they approve with 17% saying they strongly approve. As was the case in February, the President's approval rating stands 19 percentage points below what it was at the end of his first 100 days in office.

Among working class respondents 68% strongly approve or approve of his performance, an increase of nine percent since our last survey was taken, while 32% disapprove or strongly disapprove. His approval rating among this group has dropped 19% since the survey the CWCS conducted at the end of his first 100 days.

Congress

While the president remains relatively popular, more than 60% of all respondents disapprove or strongly disapprove of the job Congress is doing. That percentage is higher among members of the working class: 73% say Congress is doing a bad job with the number evenly split between those who disapprove and those who strongly disapprove.

As is the case in most surveys, however, respondents generally have a favorable opinion of their own representative. Slightly more than 60% say they approve or strongly approve of the job their Congressperson is doing, and 66% say they intend to vote for their incumbent representative next Tuesday.

Direction of the country/State of the economy

Anyone examining the responses to questions regarding the direction in which the country is moving and the state of the economy would readily understand why "change" is the overarching theme of the impending election:

Would you say things in America are headed in the right direction or are on the wrong track?	Overall	Working Class	Mahoning Valley
Right Direction	36%	36%	44%
Wrong Direction	30%	30%	30%
Neither/Mixed	33%	32%	26%

Please note that the CWCS has, for the first time, broken out the responses of Mahoning Valley residents. In general they feel better about the direction of the country than members of the working class and all other respondents. This is also the case when they were asked about the direction in which their community was moving. More than 45% said the Valley was moving in the right direction while less than 30% said it was moving the wrong way. This may reflect optimism generated by GM's decision to build the Cruze in Lordstown and V & M Steel's \$650 million expansion in Youngstown.

The right direction/wrong direction numbers have held steady over the six months since our last survey was fielded.

Although respondents had mixed feelings about the direction the nation was heading they are unambiguous about the condition of the economy.

How would you rate the condition of the U.S. economy today?	Overall	Working Class
Very Good	0.4%	0.2%
Good	11%	23%
Bad	66%	63%
Very Bad	22%	13%

As difficult as it may be to believe, the level of pessimism has actually dropped since February when 92% of respondents said the economy was bad or very bad and only eight percent characterized it as good. The percentage of those participating in the survey who believe the economy is very bad has dropped by six points while the number believing it is good has risen by four.

Working-class respondents were slightly more optimistic, but in either case the party in power faces severe challenges when such a large percentage of the population feels this uneasy about the state of the country and the economy.

The Upcoming Election

Although those who participated in the survey overwhelmingly identify themselves as Democrats and are highly dissatisfied with the condition of the economy and the state of the nation, that dissatisfaction has not undermined their political activism. To the contrary, it appears to have motivated them to vote at a higher rate than they normally would in an off-year election.

In order to measure the level of enthusiasm relative to the upcoming balloting, participants were asked how often they had voted in past mid-term elections.

Is voting in mid-term election something you always do, nearly always do, usually do, or sometimes do?	All Respondents
Always	70%
Nearly Always	15%
Usually Do	5%
Sometimes Do	6%
Never Do	3%

We then asked them to rate the importance of 2010 mid-term election as compared to past mid-terms. More than two-thirds said the impending election was more important.

How important is the 2010 election compared to other mid-term elections?	All Respondents
More Important	69%
Less Important	1%
About the Same	27%
No opinion/Refused	2%

Finally we asked how likely they were to cast a ballot on November 2.

How likely are you to vote in the 2010 mid-term election?	Overall	Mahoning Valley Residents
Absolutely Certain	82%	92%
Probably	8%	6%
Chances are 50-50	4%	4%
Not Likely	1%	0%
Will Not	1%	1%
No Answer/Refused	1%	0%

This level of enthusiasm is good news for Ted Strickland, who is locked in a tight gubernatorial race with John Kasich. It could also be of great help to the party's down ticket candidates, including AG Richard Cordray, Treasurer Kevin Boyce, and David Pepper and Mary Ellen O'Shaughnessy who are running for auditor and secretary of state respectively, each of whom is locked in a close contest. It is doubtful, however, that Democratic fervor will be enough to push Lee Fisher who is down double-digits in most polls, past Rob Portman in the race for the U.S. Senate. When asked, Ohio voters participating in the survey favored Strickland over Kasich by 70 percentage points. Valley residents supported the incumbent governor 76% to 11% with 13% undecided.

If the election for governor were held today for whom would you vote?	Overall	Mahoning Valley Residents
John Kasich	82%	11%
Ted Strickland	12%	76%
Other	6%	0%
Undecided	0%	13%

The survey was conducted between October 11 and October 26, 2010. For more information please contact Dr. John Russo at 330-941-2976.