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1-year poll shows changed views on Obama

By Susan Page, USA TODAY

GRAND LEDGE, Mich. — Shannon Norris thinks President Obama deserves more time to deliver on his promises from last year's campaign. But not too much more.

"Everybody today in the United States is looking to point a finger for the problems," the teacher says as she takes a break from running the 4-H petting zoo at the annual fall festival in this leafy Michigan town of 9,000 just west of Lansing. "Well, the problems started long before (Obama) got into office. It's too soon."

On the other hand, three years after she got her master's degree in education, Norris, 38, who voted for Obama, is just scraping by on \$75-a-day substitute-teaching jobs. With the housing market down, she and her husband, Jerry, owe more on their home than it's worth.

As the anniversary of the election approaches, the tidal wave of hope that swept Obama into office has ebbed and some perceptions of the president have changed, the USA TODAY/Gallup Poll finds. He's seen more as a down-the-line liberal, less as someone who can bridge partisan divides. Still, he retains a fair share of voter regard and his approval rating, while no longer in the stratosphere of those early days, remains at 50% or just above in Gallup's daily survey.

A year later, it's a wait-and-see nation.

"There's a kind of realism that's taken over, that 'the change you can believe in' — people have woken up and seen that as kind of a talking point, and I think there's some disappointment, some deflation," says Lawrence Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. "On the other hand, when you take into account he's been president during the sharpest economic decline since the Great Depression, it's astounding that his support is not weaker."

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The public's view of Obama is critical to his clout. It affects his ability to persuade reluctant moderates to sign on to revamping the health care system and to persuade liberals unhappy with some of its compromises to stay on board. It will help determine how much public support he can command for his decision on whether to deploy more U.S. troops to Afghanistan.

His standing also will be one important factor on whether Democrats suffer big losses in next year's congressional elections — including in a hotly contested rematch here.

This is one of the places Obama courted in 2008. George W. Bush won Michigan's 7th Congressional District in 2000 and 2004 for the GOP, but Obama addressed an exuberant rally here in August, and he carried it in November.

What do voters here think about Obama now?

Roy Zerman, 65, voted for Republican John McCain in 2008 and still isn't impressed with Obama. "He says no taxes (increases) for health care — well, the money has to come from someplace," says Zerman, a retired forklift operator from Lansing. He strolls past the fair's quilting demonstration and blacksmith stand with his grandchildren, ages 4 and 6. "We're bailing out the banks and the car companies, and my granddaughter is going to pay for it."

Matt Wendling, 41, usually votes Republican but supported Obama last year. "I wasn't that pleased with Mr. (George W.) Bush and how things were going, and certainly not with McCain and Sarah Palin," he recalls. "I was hoping for a change."

The engineer from Bath, Mich., worries that the \$787 billion stimulus bill hasn't succeeded in boosting the economy, but he says: "It's early enough. We should give the guy a chance."

Obama can't count on that sort of patience lasting forever.

"That is a plank Barack Obama is walking, and there is an end to it." Jacobs says. "Each day he is in office, he takes more ownership of the economy and more blame for the ... bad economic news."

Not gleeful, but less glum

A year ago, the public was nearly desolate: In a USA TODAY Poll the weekend after the election, just 13% were satisfied with the country's direction. That was in the middle of a three-month period of the most downbeat views in the 30 years Gallup has asked the question.

Now 26% are satisfied — not exactly a gleeful mood, but less glum. Six in 10 predict the country will be better off in three years, the end of Obama's term.

The political landscape has shifted, too. A year ago, nearly two-thirds of those surveyed said the economy should be Obama's top priority. Now that's declined to four in 10 — still the dominant issue, but by a less overwhelming margin. Attention to health care, the deficit and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has grown.

Confidence in Obama's ability to deliver on his campaign promises has eroded, especially on domestic issues. A majority of those surveyed now say his administration won't be able to control federal spending or improve the health care system. The biggest decline has been on his pledge to ease the nation's fierce

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partisanship: A year ago, 54% said he would be able to "heal political divisions"; now only 28% say so.

Still, the president continues to be seen as a strong leader, and more Americans approve of him than endorse his policies. More than half of those polled say they trust Obama when it comes to changing the health care system. In contrast, close to two-thirds say they have little or no trust in congressional Republicans.

The survey of 1,521 adults by land line and cellphone Oct. 16-19 has a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

A president's standing a year after the election isn't a reliable forecast of how his term will go: [Bill Clinton](#) had the lowest approval rating among modern elected presidents at this point but won a second term anyway.

Still, first impressions do matter, and they tend to stick. Last fall, when the Pew Research Center asked in a poll for a word that described candidate Obama, the adjective mentioned most frequently was "inexperienced." This spring, the most common attribute for President Obama was "intelligent" or "smart."

"Change," the second most common word last fall, dropped out of the top 10. "Socialist" moved up to No. 3.

In interviews across southern Michigan — in Grand Ledge, Battle Creek and Jackson — Obama does seem to have a reservoir of goodwill. Supporters and critics occasionally refer to him simply as "Barack," an unusual degree of familiarity toward a president. Some volunteer their pride in the election of the nation's first African-American president.

Jake Smith and his girlfriend, Molly Russell, didn't vote for Obama and aren't fans of his policies. "He's putting us in debt, and it's the young generations like me that are going to pay for it," says Smith, 27, of Saginaw, a recent MBA graduate. "Spending and government control of everything: It's kind of a slippery slope."

Russell, 24, a graduate student from Mount Pleasant, nods in agreement but also adds: "I do think he has good intentions."

After the [Democratic](#) National Convention in Denver, Obama and running mate [Joe Biden](#) drew an overflow crowd to C.O. Brown Stadium in Battle Creek.

Amanda Satterfield, a homemaker from Battle Creek, was among those who attended. Quoted then in the *Battle Creek Enquirer*, she said Obama "inspires me just to be a better person." She added, "Things can be different; we don't need to live like this if we have the right person in government."

And now?

"Basically, I think he's doing extremely well, considering," says Satterfield, 37, although she acknowledges times still are hard. "You have to give somebody a chance to get situated and acclimated with his duties and responsibilities. He went in expecting to work, and I think he has been working."

A congressional rematch

No one is watching Obama's standing here more closely than [Mark Schauer](#) and [Tim Walberg](#).

Last year, Schauer, the Democratic nominee in Michigan's 7th Congressional District, narrowly ousted Walberg, then a freshman Republican congressman. Now Walberg is seeking a rematch in 2010, and he predicts Obama won't be the advantage to Schauer that he was in 2008.

"The shine is off the apple and the luster is off the car," Walberg says of Obama in an interview at a coffee shop in Jackson. "This man of hope and change — a lot of people are saying, 'We hope we can change.'"

Walberg even hosted a fundraiser in the district this month with South Carolina Republican Rep. [Joe Wilson](#) as the headliner. Wilson gained notoriety in September after he shouted "You lie!" during Obama's address on health care to a Joint Session of Congress. He later apologized.

More than 200 people paid between \$20 and \$150 for tickets to the fundraiser, which also drew a few protesters, Walberg says. While Walberg says he might have chosen different words — "I would have said 'Untrue,' " — he didn't disagree with Wilson's sentiments. Contributors at the fundraiser told Wilson they "were pleased to have a voice saying what we were shouting at the TV that night," he says.

Schauer acknowledges Obama boosted his candidacy last year. "Definitely Barack Obama created a movement with trends of momentum and enthusiasm that helped all Democrats," he says in an interview after addressing the annual dinner of the [NAACP](#) chapter in Jackson County, Mich.

These days, he sees a more energized GOP. He declined to hold open town-hall-style meetings this summer for fear they would have become forums for the conservative protests that roiled the sessions members of Congress held elsewhere.

Even so, he predicts the president will be an asset for him again in 2010. "I do see the president as an advantage," Schauer says. And Walberg says he's more likely to try to tie Schauer to House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) than to Obama, an indication that he sees her as a safer target. "She's his leader," he says.

At Shrank's Cafeteria & Catering Co. in downtown Battle Creek, the breakfast crowd of local lawyers, business owners and city workers regularly debate how things are going. "Attitude, that's about it — some feel a little better," says lawyer [Michael Jordan](#), 67, a political independent who voted for Obama.

"The market is still slow," says real estate agent Bruce Phillips, 61, who declines to say how he voted last year. "(Loan interest) rates are still low, but it all comes down to jobs. If you don't have a job, you can't make the payment." He says foreclosures are up from a year ago.

Battle Creek's iconic cereal business — it is the world headquarters of Kellogg's and the founding home for Post — has helped keep the local economy going. (Even so, [Kellogg's Cereal](#) City USA — a local attraction featuring a simulated production line and statues of Rice Krispies mascots Snap, Crackle & Pop — closed its doors in 2007.)

The billion-dollar stimulus bill approved by the Democratic-controlled Congress has "definitely" helped the economy, Jordan says. Phillips is less impressed. "It's a [Band-Aid](#) on a big wound," he says.

What about Obama?


"He's just printed money," scoffs Bill Minear, 78, a retired business owner and a McCain voter. "Where's the change he promised?"

"I'd give him a C, a C-plus," says Phillips, calling Obama no better than average.

"A B-plus, because of the mess he took over," says Jordan, adding "it's too early to tell if it works."

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