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N.J. has high hopes for Obama

Monday, January 26, 2009

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BY ELISE YOUNG
NorthJersey.com
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New Jerseyans are confident that Barack Obama — president for less than a week — will fix the country's financial mess, improve their lives and foster better race relations, a Record poll shows.

At the same time, respondents spared no ill feelings toward former President George W. Bush: Barely one in five gave his presidency a thumbs-up, a low point coming at the end of his eight years in office. The outgoing president couldn't muster a favorable rating even from the majority of Republicans polled.

THE RECORD POLL

Read the results of The Record's telephone poll

Indeed, of those polled who had an opinion, a majority agreed that the Democratic Obama administration should investigate whether the Bush administration committed crimes in its prosecution of the war on terror.

"It's clearly a honeymoon period for [Obama]," said Del Ali of Research 2000, which conducted the poll for The Record. "New Jersey voters are feeling pretty good. 'Optimistic' is probably the word."

Bush's numbers were no surprise, Ali said.

"He's a pretty unpopular dude. I have no other way of putting it," he said.

The poll was conducted Jan. 21 and 22, the first and second full days of the Obama administration. It has a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points.

Obama carried New Jersey on Nov. 4 with 57.3 percent of the vote, to Republican John McCain's 41.7 percent. The poll, of 600 registered voters, had nearly identical results: Fifty-seven percent said they chose Obama and 41 percent McCain.



AP FILE PHOTO

President Barack Obama speaks to reporters during his meeting with Democratic and Republican leaders, Friday, Jan. 23, 2009.

Together, the poll numbers portray New Jerseyans like shareholders of a sagging corporation eager to see great work from a promising new CEO — and even a bit willing to cut the new guy some slack.

Fifty-two percent selected the economy as the most important issue facing Obama. Sixty-four percent said Obama was very likely or likely to make the economy sound again.

But the poll revealed a grim assessment of the depth of the economic mess. More than 80

percent of respondents predicted it would take at least two years for Obama to turn things around; the majority of Republicans, 62 percent, said the job would take his entire term.

Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project for the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, said Obama appears to click with New Jersey in part because he has communicated about the issues facing the country.

"It built on disappointment in the Bush administration, that began with the war," Reed said. "Now they have a person who speaks with confidence, who seems to speak to

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them as though they are good people and they know what the problems are. ... I think it's sort of a human response: 'We're in trouble and here's a leader that appears to be telling us the truth.' It's validating what we know, and that we can persevere."

Beyond the economy, the second most-pressing matter was health care, named by 13 percent of respondents. The war in Iraq ranked fifth and domestic security/terrorism sixth.

The respondents indicated that race was very much on their minds, and hopeful sentiment carried across racial and political divides.

Eighty-three percent said the fact that an African-American man was president made them especially proud of their country. Among Democrats, the figure was 89 percent and among Republicans, 52 percent.

From a racial perspective, 97 percent of blacks were proud, as were 91 percent of Hispanics and 79 percent of whites.

Answers about Obama's ability to improve race relations were more complex.

Sixty-three percent said relations would be better. But confidence varied by party affiliation. A majority — 73 percent — of Democrats agreed, but just 40 percent of Republicans agreed.

Blacks, at 75 percent, were more confident on the relations issue than others. Seventy-one percent of Hispanics said relations would be better, as did 59 percent of whites.



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