

Jobs Are the Answer to Low Public Approval

Public Opinion Is Historically Tied to the Employment Rate

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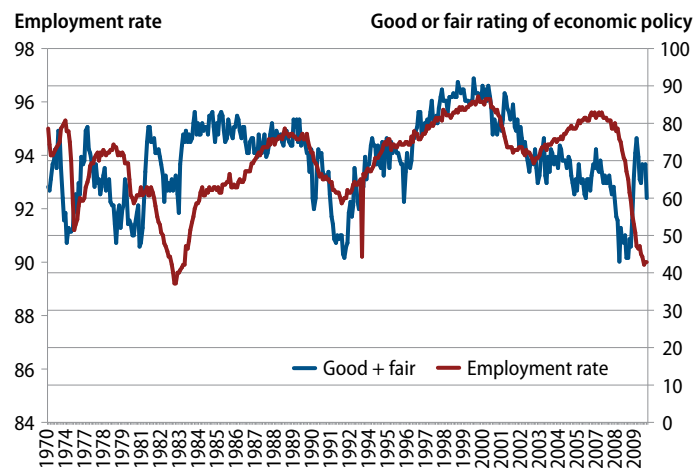
Poll after poll shows that the public is deeply concerned about our country's economy and political leadership, and a new Democracy Corps survey finds that a majority of voters (54 percent) believe that President Barack Obama's economic policies have done nothing to relieve the recession.

Supporters of President Obama's economic agenda often lament that he isn't getting sufficient credit from the public for preventing the Great Recession from turning into the Great Depression. The public mood shouldn't be so negative, they argue, because independent analysis demonstrates that the president's actions helped reverse the economy's steep decline, prevented continuing job loss, and has spurred four straight quarters of economic growth.

The president's actions have certainly made things better than they would be otherwise. But a look back at history shows that there is nothing special about how the public is reacting to today's economy. The majority of the public gives a president and his economic policies high marks when jobs are plentiful and low marks when unemployment is high.

It is striking how closely the employment rate is tied to public favorability toward the government's economic policy. Figure 1 compares responses to a long-running University of Michigan survey of public attitudes about the

FIGURE 1
Support for the government's economic policy closely tracks the employment rate



Source: Thompson Reuters/University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers.

Note: Employment rate is calculated as 100 minus the percent unemployed. We do not use the employment-to-population ratio since the increasing number of women entering the workforce over time would distort this relationship.

government's economic policy with the percentage of the workforce employed over the past 40 years. There are a few exceptions—mainly where a new president's policies receive a temporary bump in support—but the basic pattern is undeniable. When unemployment is high, support for the president's economic policy agenda is low.

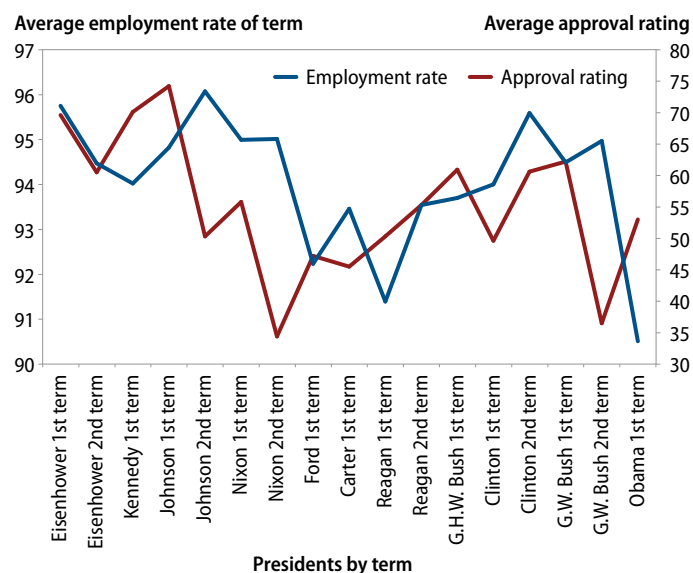
Overall approval of the president also closely tracks with whether or not jobs are plentiful. Figure 2 compares the average presidential approval rates since Eisenhower's first term with the average percentage of the workforce that had jobs during that term. The pattern is again clear. The public's views of the president are heavily influenced by whether jobs are available.

Public approval is highly dependent on whether people have jobs. So even if a president makes things better than they would be otherwise—it is unlikely to be enough to sway the public if unemployment is still high. People need jobs before they give the president credit for an improving economy.

There may be temporary bandages to help improve public opinion in the short term. Political strategists Stan Greenberg and James Carville argue that President Obama needs a different economic message that focuses less on trying to take credit for a slowly improving economy and instead emphasizes fighting for the middle class. But, in the long run, elected officials need to dramatically reduce the unemployment rate and ensure that the public can find jobs in order to significantly raise public approval of their performance.

It is a common refrain that efforts to create jobs should be the number one priority on the policy agenda, but history makes clear how true that is.

FIGURE 2
Presidential approval rating also closely tracks the employment rate



Source: Gallup, Presidential Job Approval Center, and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Note: Employment rate is calculated as 100 minus the percent unemployed. We do not use the employment-to-population ratio since the increasing number of women entering the workforce over time would distort this relationship.