

Experts divided over Obama's sliding support rate

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Aug. 14 (Xinhua) -- Experts are divided over whether U.S. President Barack Obama's slipping approval ratings represent deep trouble or a momentary setback.

A recent CNN/Opinion Research Corp. survey found that Obama's approval ratings dropped seven percentage points from April to 56 percent. Negative opinion snowballed in June when 5 percent of the plunge occurred. And in another poll conducted by Quinnipiac University, the president's approval rate sank to 50 percent.

Stephen Webber, chief operating officer with the Program on International Policy Attitudes, said while the president had run into a thorny public relations patch, he remained popular.

"It's fair to say that the bloom has come off the rose a bit with the tough political work that needs to be done," he said. "But he is still the most popular political figure in the country, much more so than any Republican figure."

"This doesn't mean he's going to have smooth sailing but it would be a mistake to say that he is badly wounded," he said.

The longer the president is in office, however, the more he will take ownership of the nation's problems, Webber said. Most poignant of these, and the one driving his approval ratings, is the floundering economy, which will soon become the "Obama economy," he said.

Others, however, believe the president is already in trouble.

"He's in a remarkably difficult situation for this early in the administration," said John Sample, director of the Center for Representative Governance at the Washington, D.C.-based CATO Institute.

Oddly enough, former President George W. Bush's approval rating stood slightly higher than Obama's at the same stage in his administration, despite early reservations about whether he was the true victor over former Vice President Al Gore, Sample said.

"The real question is whether Obama can turn it around in the next month or two," Sample said. His popularity is likely to rise over the next year if the economy improves, "but it does look like the window of opportunity is closing on him."

In its first months, the administration coasted on a wave of glowing press reports and high expectations. But as the economy worsened, the

president began to shoulder some of the blame. "He has disappointed expectations that were not realistic to begin with," Sample said.

The key is to stay out of the "Bush trap," which means strong support in the party's base but being unable to lock in independents. But experts remain unsure of what independent voters are seeking, and some say Obama may have to present himself as more of a moderate, Sample said.

Erica Suares, deputy director of senate relations at the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation, said it was still too early to draw conclusions during these early months of Obama's presidency.

"We'll have to wait and see what happens with health care and the economy to see if these numbers mean he is in real trouble or not," she said. "The next few months will be critical (for his popularity)."

With health care on the Democratic front burner, passing or not passing legislation could become crucial. "If he can't be successful in health care he'll lose a ton of momentum," she said.

And the Quinnipiac poll numbers do not bode well for Obama, she said. "It shows that people are concerned."

Webber said the controversy over health care reform had been "difficult sledding for the president. And how that is going to come out over the next few months isn't clear." But if he can pass his health care legislation, "I suspect he will have a boost."

Darrell West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, said the poll numbers are nothing unusual, given that most presidents' approval rates have fallen during recessions. That was true with President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s and the senior Bush in 1991, he said.

And compared with the fact that some presidents dropped to the 40 percent mark during economic downturns, Obama's approval ratings are high.

"If you look at the polls, people still like Obama," West said. "His personal popularity is still strong, but people are worried about the economy."

Climbing back up in the polls, however, will depend on how soon the economy rebounds.

"Unemployment has to stabilize," West said. But despite unemployment rates nearing 10 percent, Obama will remain popular as long as those figures do not rise further, he said.

"If he can keep it at 10 percent he'll do alright," he said. "If it rises above 10 percent his numbers will drop further."

Many people had high hopes that the stimulus package would revive the economy, though they were later disappointed when it didn't do so soon

enough. However, it did not play a role in the sinking poll numbers, West said. "Congress passed the stimulus bill in February and (Obama) still had good numbers at that point," he said. "The numbers began to drop when unemployment rose."

Sample said the president would face a hurdle in November's Virginia and New Jersey gubernatorial elections. If the Democrat candidates lose, it will indicate waning support for the president.

"Those kinds of signals will not be missed," he said.

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