

ECONOMY

Windows Of
Opportunity

WE'RE STILL A BOOTSTRAP NATION. FEW AMERICANS SEE GOVERNMENT AS THE BEST HOPE FOR IMPROVING THEIR LIVES.

Saturday, July 25, 2009
by Will Englund

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On April 27, as a driving rain swept in from Lake Michigan, Vice President Biden flew into Chicago and headed for Goose Island on the Chicago River to tout the government's determination to open doors for the American people. He was there to celebrate a new start for a window factory that had been abruptly shut down by its previous owners four months earlier and had been the setting for a sit-down strike by its 260 remaining union workers. A California manufacturer of energy-efficient building materials bought the factory, viewing it as a business opportunity -- thanks to the billions of dollars about to start flowing from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

"We understand," Biden said, "that our success is not measured by a statistical jump in the GDP but by a leap forward in opportunity -- the kind of thing that's happening here today."

Although the window factory has yet to swing into full production, the Obama administration argues that Recovery Act investments across the country will soon begin to provide returns in jobs and in opportunities. Having vowed to save or create 4 million jobs in the face of the economic downturn, including the 260 on Goose Island, President Obama looks further ahead and sees a fundamental shift. "That's how we'll open the doors of opportunity and lay a new foundation for our economic growth -- by investing in our citizens," he said on May 8.

But if he succeeds in making government the engine of opportunity, Obama is going to surprise a majority of Americans.

A new [Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor poll](#) finds that just 16 percent of Americans believe that government investment in technology, industry, and training is the best way to increase opportunity. Only 17 percent look to private-sector companies as a source of new opportunity. A few more, 22 percent, say that the best way to increase opportunity would be for the government to get out of the way by reducing taxes and regulations. All the rest -- 40 percent -- believe that opportunity

ANALYSIS

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ECONOMY

Back Off, Obama

Sara Jerome

A Pennsylvania housekeeper fears for her job -- and the her health insurance -- but still sees Obama's health reform efforts as government interference. [\[more...\]](#)

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comes from their own efforts.

Those numbers don't vary much across demographic divides. (Middle managers are one interesting exception to the trend.) Overall, Americans overwhelmingly agree that theirs is the land of opportunity -- 87 percent sign on to that description -- and by a large plurality, they subscribe to a doctrine of self-reliance.

"It's a land where you're not restricted from using your talents or what job you want to do," said Tom Kozlowski of Eugene, Ore., a 60-year-old poll respondent who agreed to take a follow-up call from a reporter. He does cost estimates for a manufacturer of hydraulic and pneumatic cylinders, parts that are crucial to new technologies as well as old ones. "It's still a country that gives you the freedom to be what you want to be. We have the opportunity to fulfill our dreams. It may be harder to get to, but we get to use our talents, and our opportunities aren't restricted."

Clearly, though, the shift that Obama envisions could still take place. Americans are skeptical of government and, in growing numbers, of his administration, but they haven't turned against either. Obama himself is not exactly opposed to the idea of individuals seizing their own opportunities. He just thinks that the government can help make that happen.

People who live in rural areas, especially in the Great Plains states, were more pessimistic about the opportunities facing their children.

As of late July, money from the Recovery Act has been slow to make a difference, and the economy continues to limp along, with inevitable results.

When poll respondents were asked whether they had greater trust in Obama or in congressional Republicans to develop solutions to the country's economic challenges, Obama got the support of 46 percent, down significantly from the 55 percent he got on the same question in April. Yet the percentage of those opting for the Republicans was barely changed, at 28 percent.

"There is a current of people who are still very skeptical about Obama, about Democrats," says Ron Haskins, who worked in the Bush 43 White House and is now co-director of the Brookings Center on Children and Families. "There could be a gathering force out there. But the odor the Republicans are giving off is -- Argentina."

Since April, Obama's overall approval rating has declined from 61 percent to 56 percent. Those who believe that the *country* is on the wrong track have increased from 42 percent to 50 percent, even while those who think that the *economy* is on the wrong track have decreased slightly, from 55 percent to 52 percent.

Not So Great

DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY



National telephone survey of 1,202 adults compared with survey of 1,200 adults conducted April 8-14; both have a margin of error ± 2.8 percentage points.

SOURCE: Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor poll conducted by FD

A majority -- 52 percent -- of respondents in the latest poll say that government actions create more obstacles to getting ahead; just 38 percent say that the government creates more opportunities. But when asked to look ahead and predict whether the actions of the Obama administration are likely to increase opportunity for ordinary Americans, 40 percent of respondents said yes, versus only 30 percent who said no. The rest said that the administration will have no impact, or they weren't willing to hazard a guess.

Concrete results could start to change people's minds. Last spring, when Serious Materials became the new owner of that Chicago window factory, it vowed to hire back the 260 workers who had lost their jobs, and probably more later on. The process since then has been slow because the plant needed retrofitting and because the weatherization contracts that will be paid for with \$8 billion from the Recovery Act haven't gone out from local governments yet. But the company is "exceptionally optimistic," Valerie Jenkins, its marketing and communications director, said last week. About two dozen employees are at work now, she said, and as long as the company can win government contracts, it should be able to ramp up before the year is out.

Possible business? How about all new windows for the Sears -- now Willis -- Tower? Or new windows for every school in Illinois?

"The opportunity is great," Jenkins said.

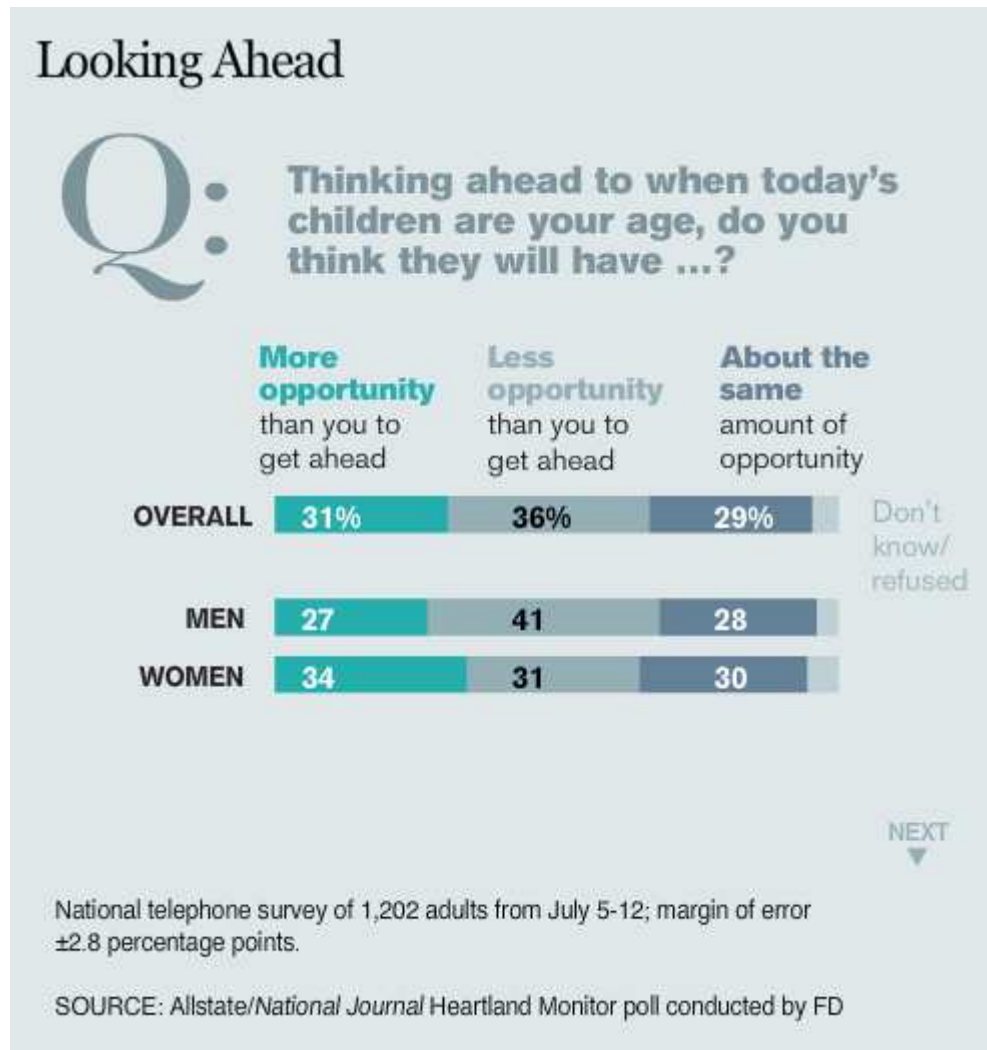
What About The Kids?

The Allstate/*National Journal* poll, conducted by Ed Reilly and Brent McGoldrick of FD, a communications strategy consulting firm, probed American attitudes toward economic opportunity from different angles. The second of four polls this year to explore the ways that American navigate the

economy, it surveyed 1,202 adults between July 5 and 12 and has a margin of error of +/-2.8 percent.

Two-thirds of Americans believe they'll be better off five years from now. Most of them believe such improvement will have more to do with their own efforts or situation than with the overall state of the economy. That's a pretty strong streak of optimism. But just below the surface, the poll found, lies a considerable amount of foreboding and anxiety.

For instance, more people (36 percent) say that their children will have less opportunity than they had, compared with those who believe the opposite (31 percent). That pessimistic attitude is stronger among whites and people who live in rural areas, especially in the Great Plains states.



"For our kids, instead of having what we used to call the American Dream, they're going to have, 'Oh, you can go into social work.' I'm very scared about what's going on right now economically," said Kenny Nolan, 56, a New Jerseyan who manages a chain of gas stations. Then there are people such as Donna Curry, 52, of Joliet, Ill. She is a quality-control clerk at a warehouse. "In our history, we've been through recessions and depressions and all of that and we've bounced back, so I don't think this is going to be any different," she said.

African-Americans like Curry are considerably more optimistic overall about opportunities for their children (57 percent see greater chances for their kids); Hispanics are somewhat less so but are still on the positive side, 38 percent to 31 percent.

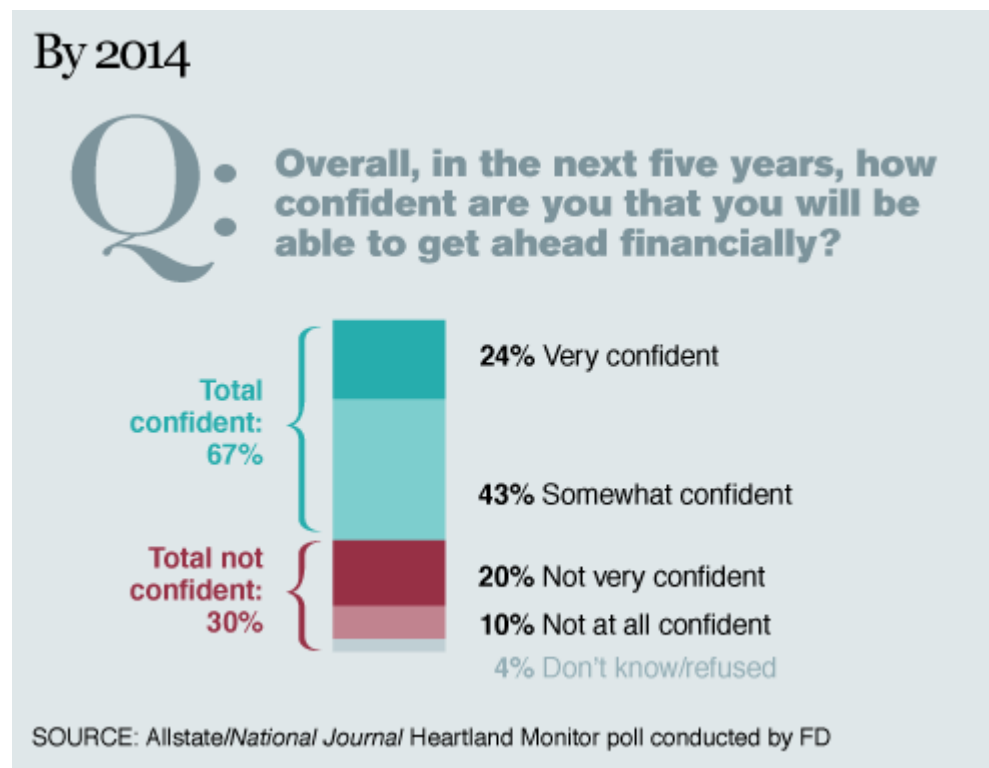
"The incredibly high optimism among blacks is fascinating," says Will Wilkinson, a Cato Institute scholar who has written about income inequality. "I would be pretty positive there's a big Obama effect. Once you've broken through a glass ceiling, it's perfectly natural to feel the whole world's a little more open to you."

A healthy majority of Americans, nearly two-thirds, agree that adequate opportunities exist for all races. African-Americans hold that belief even more than whites. But when the subject is family wealth -- when respondents are asked if children from all income groups have adequate opportunities -- half of all Americans say no.

Is race, Wilkinson asks, incidental to poverty? Unlikely. But Americans seem to be recognizing that a minority kid with a middle-class background -- one like the young Barack Obama, for instance -- doesn't have to be held back by prejudice. "But there are huge swaths of the minority population who are not middle-class," he says. "Their kids never get the foundation that someone like Obama got."

Financial assets, rather than income, are the key to getting ahead -- and minority families in America have one-tenth the assets that white families have, says Juhu Thukral, who works for an advocacy group in New York City called the Opportunity Agenda. That leaves minority families closer to the edge; studies have shown that African-Americans are more likely than whites to fall out of the middle class.

Half of the respondents in the poll said they can scrape by every month, but with little left over for savings or retirement. (About a quarter say they can live comfortably, and another quarter find it hard to make ends meet.) Among both blacks and Hispanics, the scrape-by contingent amounts to 60 percent.



'Doors Of Opportunity'

Even as Obama talks about using the power of the federal government to expand opportunities, especially in cities and for minorities, the president is quite clear about individual responsibility.

Although the steepest barriers to opportunity for African-Americans are the structural inequalities and neglect that are the legacy of discrimination, Obama said at the NAACP convention last week that that doesn't let individuals off the hook. "We've got to say to our children, Yes, if you're African-American, the odds of growing up amid crime and gangs are higher. Yes, if you live in a poor neighborhood, you will face challenges that somebody in a wealthy suburb does not have to face. But that's not a reason to get bad grades, that's not a reason to cut class, that's not a reason to give up on your education and drop out of school. No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands. You cannot forget that.

"Yes, government must be a force for opportunity. Yes, government must be a force for equality. But

ultimately, if we are to be true to our past, then we also have to seize our own future, each and every day."

Last month, Michelle Obama made the same point in her commencement speech at the Washington Math and Science Tech Public Charter High School. "No excuses," she said. "Your future today is in your own hands. See, with this diploma, this education, the doors of opportunity are so open wide to you. Nothing is standing in your way. So it's up to you to make the most of what you've been given."

That message may resonate most strongly with Hispanics, who, more than any other group of Americans covered by the poll, believe that opportunity comes from personal effort -- 55 percent said so. The experience of immigration and the culture of strong family ties could account for much of that belief.

Carlos Contreras, 26, who works a construction job in Chicago, said he got his work ethic from his Mexican grandparents. "That's the way we were raised. My grandparents or someone else's, working on the ranch or somewhere else, they worked for their money. They didn't wait for someone to come over and say, 'Here is some money.' "

In general, the poll finds that Americans have fairly complicated feelings about education as a doorway to opportunity. When respondents were asked to name the one personal action that would most increase their opportunity, the largest number, 35 percent, said it would be to enroll in classes to get more education or training. Of all those polled, 58 percent said they wished they had gotten more education.

But respondents gave elementary and secondary schools a tepid endorsement at best (55 percent called them adequate), and half agreed that college is too expensive a burden. Only 40 percent called it a ticket to the middle class.

Of everything the government might do to increase opportunity, the poll found the most support for help with paying college bills.

This might be an outgrowth of the recognition that a college degree is more about proving that you can show up and complete a project than it is about what you actually learn, Wilkinson suggests, which in turn raises the question of why it's so expensive. Haskins points out that a lot of people really don't like sitting in school very much -- it's a big commitment of time and money, plus you have to write term papers.

"College is not affordable. And it's difficult to get scholarships. I graduated in 1996; by 2005, I was finally finished paying for college. College is not for everyone, but those who want to go should go." This was the less-than-ringing endorsement of Ari Devin, 35, who lives near Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and works for a large consulting company.

The Obama administration is committed to expanding job-training programs and to increasing tuition aid. It launched a website called *Opportunity.gov*. A tuition tax credit dates back to the Clinton administration, but as Haskins notes, it's largely used by middle-class families, who can take advantage of it, rather than poor families.

As Obama said on April 24, "This trend -- a trend where a quality higher education slips out of reach for ordinary Americans -- threatens the dream of opportunity that is America's promise to all its children. It threatens to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. And it threatens to undercut America's competitiveness."

'Basically, It's Self-Reliance'

Americans may be skeptical of government, but they aren't exactly enthralled by the business world, either. More than half say that private companies think only about the short term and see employees as dispensable; just 40 percent think that companies do a good job of identifying qualified workers and giving them an opportunity to advance. Forty-three percent say that today's economy rewards the rich and makes it hard for average people to get ahead.

ECONOMY

'Just Read, Read, Read'

Sara Jerome

Charlie Lavender, 61, is skeptical of instant gratification and believes that education can open doors. His hours are getting cut at the Arkansas paper mill where he works, because the demand for newsprint is declining. So he's educating himself. [[more...](#)]

"It's like a lottery, and I don't even play the lottery, because it's a bad investment," said Tanya Ewig, a 42-year-old Republican in Milwaukee who works one day a week for a family plumbing business. Her husband was just laid off. "What do you have to do -- just be born lucky? Sometimes I think, Do I have to have someone adopt me so I can live a semi-normal life?"

There is considerable distaste for the churning of jobs that has become a recent hallmark of the economy. Healthy majorities think of it as a negative factor, threatening instability and risk. Yet 80 percent of respondents who are employed say they haven't had an involuntary job change in the past five years. More than half have worked 10 years or more with the same employer.

Even among people who have held jobs for a long while, anxiety is understandable and prudent, Thukral says. They can see things falling apart around them, she says, and the potential consequences are severe. "Losing your job isn't just losing your income. It's losing your health care. It could lead to losing your house. The stakes are so much higher."

Some people -- about 30 percent of the sample -- see the new instability as an opportunity in itself. "When I graduated college in the '90s, they told us we'd go through five different careers. Now they tell you eight different careers," Devin said. "I've been with my company six years in August. I'd love to stay at the same company, but to get ahead, that might not be the best avenue. The way to make more money is to take a chance and change jobs sometimes."

In any case, a longing for a paternalistic hand isn't likely any time soon. Being on one's own is a value that Americans, well, cling to. "They believe more than Europeans or people from other parts of the world that it's individual initiative that gets you ahead," says Haskins, who recently co-wrote a Brookings report called "Creating an Opportunity Society." "They're very distrustful of big institutions, which I think is healthy."

Studies show that the United States offers less economic mobility than Europe does, he says. "The apple falls closer to the tree than in other countries." Yet Americans are more concerned about economic opportunity, and less about financial security, than Europeans are.

In March, the Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts conducted a poll that asked some questions similar to those in the *Allstate/National Journal* survey. The results were much the same. "We definitely have this cultural notion that hard work will help you get ahead," said Ianna Kachoris, the project manager. "Is that actually true?"

She and others suggest that it's less true than it should be. But her survey also found that if Americans rely on themselves to get ahead, they also tend to blame themselves if they fall behind. The three factors most often cited as likely to contribute to someone's moving down the economic ladder were poor life choices, too much debt, and lack of education.

But the *Allstate/National Journal* poll found that Americans' sense of opportunity isn't limited to economic mobility. Given seven choices, the largest group of respondents, one-third of the total, said that America as the "Land of Opportunity" means "living in a society where you can make the most of your talents and potential." The next most popular answers, in descending order, were "providing your children with a better life than you had"; "maintaining a balance between work and other things in life you enjoy"; and "achieving an education and learning as much as you can." Those three together accounted for another 40 percent of the responses. Just 11 percent picked answers related purely to financial well-being.

Two of the respondents put opportunity into these terms:

"For the most part, it's all on the individual. You have to get out there, see what's out there, do whatever it is you went to school for, or whatever," said Curry, the African-American woman from Illinois. "You have to get out there and find it; you have to really actually look. Basically, it's self-

ECONOMY

Opportunity in a Downturn

Sara Jerome

When Tressa Smail, 34, lost money in the stock market last year, she was grateful for the opportunity. [\[more...\]](#)

ECONOMY

Manufacturing Potential

Sara Jerome

When you're a cost estimator for a hydraulic and pneumatic cylinders manufacturer, you're not [\[more...\]](#)

reliance."

"The way you make opportunity for people is, you don't tell them what to do or how to do it," said Devin, the white man from upstate New York. "Let them create on their own."

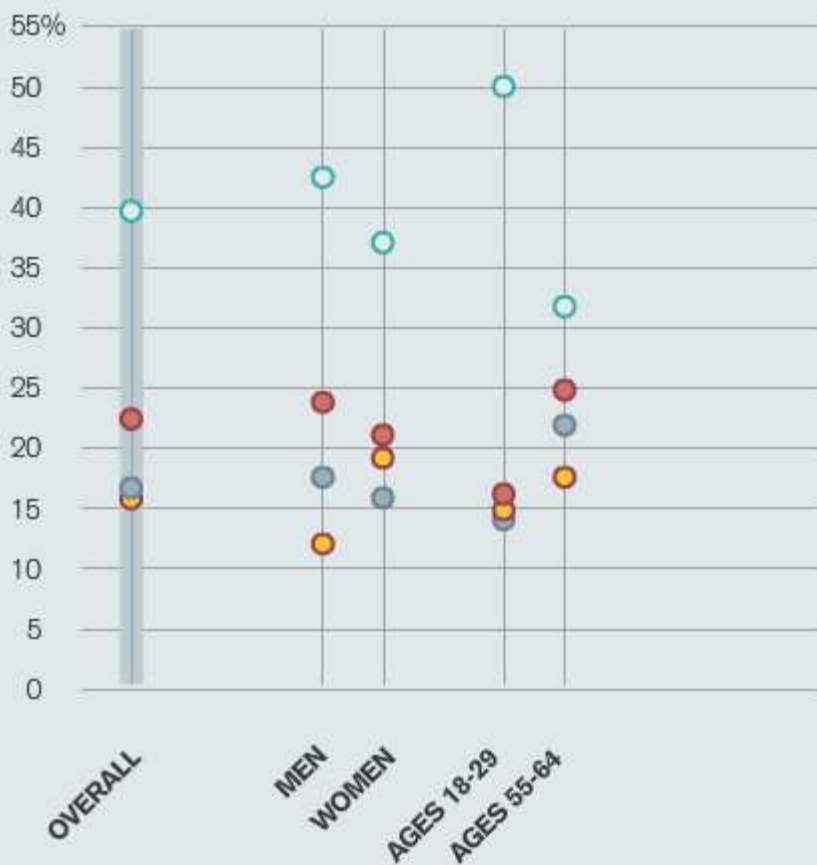
Reporting Intern Sara Jerome contributed to this article.

Sources Of Hope

Q:

In general, would you say the best way to increase opportunity for you comes from ...

- Your own efforts
- Government reducing taxes, regulations
- Government investment
- Private sector



National telephone survey of 1,202 adults from July 5-12; margin of error ± 2.8 percentage points.

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