

## **The Mood of America**

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The findings of the current NBC-WSJ survey (conducted by telephone from April 11 to 13, among 900 registered voters) were just released, along with those of the Pew Poll; together the two studies provide a very comprehensive picture on how the American public is regarding life during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the NBC-WSJ poll has more political and 2020 election data, both surveys' findings underscore the current fear and uncertainty Americans are feeling about their safety and economic security, as well as their assessment of how Donald Trump is handling the crisis.

Donald Trump has never achieved a job or a personal rating over 50%. And his scores (including the trial heat pairing him against Joe Biden) have hardly budged over the first 15 weeks of 2020. They did not dip dramatically during the impeachment hearings, and they have not changed since the onset of COVID-19. The steadiness of his ratings is partially due to the silo nature of politics during the Trump presidency: Democrats are totally negative and Republicans are unabashedly totally positive. But there are challenges ahead for President Trump and his steady ratings. His weak ratings for his handling of COVID-19 offer a glimpse of what is likely to come.

Historically, during times of major crisis, the American public has collectively rooted for the nation and rallied behind their president. Indeed, past presidents such as Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush saw their approval ratings surge during major crises. But in each past instance, the period of patience and convalescence has been followed by judgment and recrimination. This is when Americans have begun to ask why the crisis happened and who is to blame for it. Over the past 50 plus years, this occurred with Vietnam, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the 9-11 terrorist attacks. In 1968 the recrimination period began after the Tet offensive in Vietnam. For President Carter the Iranian hostage crisis shifted from "yellow ribbons" of support to a critique of why the rescue effort failed. After 9-11, the depth of feeling and fear was a time when President Bush's positive ratings soared into the 80's. The recrimination came later with

the decision to go to war in Afghanistan and the failure to capture Osama Bin Laden.

For now, attitudes toward COVID-19 present a picture of fear and uncertainty regarding both physical and financial health. The mood as expressed in the volunteered comments is one of “getting on with getting on,” but additionally there is an equal mix of fear and restlessness in these remarks. Yet, personal fear is growing rapidly. Currently, 73% say they are either very or somewhat worried that a family member might catch the coronavirus—a 20-point rise in just this one month. Even more ominous, some 40% of Americans say they personally know someone who has been infected.

The Pew Poll uncovered the following concerns.

- 73% believe the worst is still to come;
- 66% fear that state governments will move too quickly in lifting restrictions on public activity; and
- 65% say that Donald Trump was too slow to take major steps to address the threat of the coronavirus;

The NBC-WSJ survey reveals similar concerns.

- 74% are not satisfied that there is enough testing to determine the actual spread of the disease.
- 58% feel that the United States will move too quickly in loosening restrictions and 32% say it will take too long.
- 62% are not satisfied that there are enough medical supplies to treat the coronavirus.

As I mentioned earlier, while past presidents (Carter and Bush 43) saw their support improve during the convalescence period, the same has not happened for Trump. Yet, on the political and job performance front, the NBC-WSJ poll has found that President Trump’s personal scores and job numbers have remained very stable in 2020, despite impeachment hearings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the current economic decline. Here are the numbers from this poll.

- Donald Trump's positive job rating is UNCHANGED: 46% in March, 46% today, and never higher than 48% or lower than 43% over the last 18 months;
- His job rating on his handling of COVID-19 is essentially unchanged, 45% in March, 44% today;
- Trump's personal ratings are 41% positive, 51% negative; they were 42%, positive 51% negative in March.

The numbers continue to show the silo nature of politics today. For Republicans, Trump's approval rating remains near 90% and among Democrats it is under 10%. But these numbers mask the more ominous rating challenges that are evidence of dissatisfaction with his handling of the coronavirus.

Two numbers in this survey provide an indication of the challenges ahead for Donald Trump:

1. Just 36% of Americans say they trust what Donald Trump has said on the coronavirus, compared with 60% for Anthony Fauci and 66% for their state's governor.
2. By 45% to 36%, Americans believe that Joe Biden would do a better job than Donald Trump responding to the coronavirus. Never has a presidential challenger received higher scores than the incumbent on handling "that issue" in the middle of the crisis.

These results are important, but I don't want to suggest that this represents the inflection point for the 2020 campaign, because it does not. However, the results of these two surveys suggest that, in this evolving pandemic, **Americans are going to be a lot less forgiving of this president than his predecessors in the recrimination phase**, which inevitably will come when patience for mitigation wears thin, when a vaccine has not become available, and when the economic recovery is longer and harsher than people anticipated.

## **Personal Reflections:**

Beyond the survey numbers, let me give a personal assessment of President Trump's most recent decisions to lend his voice (or tweet) in support of the protesters who are favoring action to "Liberate Michigan," as well as other states. In doing so, he has forfeited the mantle of leadership and taken the side of unruly protestors. The message he sends does not exhort or honor Americans who are sacrificing daily and adjusting their work, family, and lifestyle for the goal of "flattening the curve," particularly the healthcare workers and public servants who heroically risk their own health to care for and save others. It is the same message President Trump sends when he insists on putting his signature on the relief checks, but refuses to wear or encourage Americans to wear protective face masks. It is the message he sends when he urges businesses to rush to open up, but refuses to fund the World Health Organization. It is the same message he sends when he lauds the military, but allows the captain of the USS Roosevelt to be relieved of duty for speaking out regarding the safety of his sailors.

Each of these actions represents the record of Donald Trump over the last month. By failing to call out the protesters, he now owns their actions and the future expansion of COVID-19. He gives up a place alongside previous presidents who in previous times of peril understood the significance of presidential leadership. In times of crisis, Americans will have the back of their president, but for that support to remain, their president must respond in kind by having their backs, even when his actions are not popular or easy.

**Sadly, Donald Trump is a "me president" in a time when America needs a "we president."**