



BY DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Monroe County voters worry most about financial future

Tom Tobin – Staff writer

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Ray Gause of Rochester is 43 years old and has been out of work since February. His dreams for the future are clouded by the pessimism that recession brings.

Roughly 40 percent of the 500 Monroe County residents who took part in the 2009 Voice of the Voter poll — Gause was one of them — say that jobs and the economy are the No. 1 issue facing the country, the state, the county and the city of Rochester.

No other issue is considered more important.

Evidence that Americans' traditional optimism has been gradually sapped by the economic downturn also can be found in the poll results. The share of respondents who expect their financial situation to be better in four years has shrunk from 37 percent in 2007 to 30 percent this year. The share expecting to be worse off has risen from 17 percent to 21 percent.

Hope is not gone. But it is in dwindling supply.

"I don't see a solution in two years at least," said Gause, an unmarried African-American who lives on the city's west side. "The economy is in a shambles. Statewide, citywide, everywhere. Things started going bad when they began sending jobs overseas."

Currently, Gause is living with his mother, helping her cope. But eventually, if he is to work in his chosen field, he expects he'll have to leave New York.

"There's not enough tourism around Rochester for someone in the hotel field," he said. The number of jobs in the region's leisure and hospitality industry slipped to 43,800 in August, down 300 from 12 months earlier after years of steady growth. Overall, the region lost 10,500 jobs between August 2008 and August 2009.

Economists and academic experts say the increased worry about the future is understandable.

"Look at how high our unemployment rate is nationally," said Larry Southwick Jr., associate professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Management. "One in 10 who wants to have a job doesn't — that's pretty high. Four or five years ago we were at 5 percent."

No boom or bust

At the same time, fears should be tempered by the fact that unemployment and job losses haven't been as bad in upstate New York as in many parts of the country, said Gary Keith, regional economist with

M&T Bank. "The job losses that are occurring right now (nationally) have a lot to do with the boom-and-bust cycle," Keith said. "Since we didn't have the boom, we don't have the bust."

Consumer spending likely won't bounce back to pre-recession levels, he added. "We're in the midst nationally of adjusting ... to a new normal. We're not using credit to spend more than what our income level permits. That's what we did to get into this situation nationally."

Among those polled, insecurity has grown along with the unemployment lines.

Manohar Santwani, 70, of Perinton is a native of India who moved to the United States years ago and is a U.S. citizen. He owns his own company and his children's employment is secure.

But that hasn't brightened his view of the country's fortunes or of President Barack Obama's approach.

"The economy is in bad shape," Santwani said. "And Obama isn't doing much about it. He talks so much, but I don't see things improving."

Santwani said some of his neighbors are living in strained economic conditions. "Some are out of work and some of those who are retired say they shouldn't have, that they should have kept working."

Retirees might wish they were still working because the stock market, despite doing better over the past six months, is still down 33 percent from its peak two years ago, meaning investment portfolios remain under duress.

Put off spending

Ted McCarty, 76, is an Eastman Kodak Co. retiree who said his personal circumstances are secure.

"But there are people I know in the rural counties outside Monroe County who are truly desperate," the Perinton resident said.

Caroline Carter, a retiree who lives in an apartment in Rochester, worked for many years as a cleaning supervisor at a hospital. She said her working days are probably over. Her worries about money are not.

"We're not getting the Social Security increase we were supposed to get," she said, referring to the lack of a cost-of-living adjustment this year that retirees had come to expect. Inflation has been too low to trigger an increase.

One or more of Carter's five children help out with finances, and, while her circumstances are stable, she has put off spending on extras.

"My daughter in Georgia called me the other day to tell me she's not working. She had some work as a teaching substitute. Another daughter works for the state in Ohio and that is a worry, too," she said.

"I'm a Democrat, but I can tell you that I don't think Obama is doing what he said. He said he would do things when he was running, but I'm not seeing them."

Yet Carter is one of those with a storehouse of hope.

"Things will start breaking better. I see some good things. RIT offered

scholarships to city kids who get good grades. I thought that was pretty great.”

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Includes reporting by staff writer Matthew Daneman.

ABOUT THE POLL

The poll was conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. of Washington, D.C., from Sept. 23 to 25. A total of 500 registered Monroe County voters were interviewed by telephone. The margin of error, according to standards customarily used by statisticians, is no more than plus or minus 4.5 percentage points. This means that there is a 95 percent probability that the “true” figure would fall within that range if the entire population were sampled. The margin of error is higher for any subgroup, such as a gender or regional grouping.

ABOUT VOICE OF THE VOTER

Voice of the Voter is a collaborative effort among the *Democrat and Chronicle*, WXXI (Channel 21 and AM 1370), WHAM-TV (Channel 13) and WDKX-FM (103.9). It seeks to inform citizens and give them a voice in the election process. The effort is funded by a Rochester Area Community Foundation grant.

THE PARTICIPANTS

According to Mason-Dixon, 38 percent of the poll respondents identified themselves as Democrats; 35 percent as Republicans; 22 percent, independent or nonaffiliated; 3 percent, Conservative; and 2 percent other. Seventy-two percent were suburban residents and 28 percent resided in the city of Rochester.

Forty percent of those responding to the poll were in the 50-64 age group; 35-49, 32 percent; 65-plus, 18 percent; and 18-34, 10 percent.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents were female and 48 percent male. The racial breakdown: white or Caucasian, 84 percent; black or African-American, 12 percent; Hispanic or Latino, 2 percent; Asian or other, 1 percent; and declined to answer, 1 percent.

The educational breakdown: college graduate, 35 percent; some college, 29 percent; high school or less, 22 percent; and graduate degree, 14 percent.

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