

Many in poll say U.S. headed in right direction

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time in years, more Americans than not said that the country was headed in the right direction, a probable sign that Barack Obama had used the first 100 days of his presidency to lift the public's mood and inspire hopes for a brighter future.

Concerned about their personal finances and medical expenses, Americans who were questioned nonetheless appeared realistic about the time Obama might need to turn things around, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll. It indicated that most Americans considered their new president to be a strong, ethical and empathetic leader who was working to change Washington.

Nobody knows how long the honeymoon will last, but Obama apparently has transformed the yes-we-can spirit of his candidacy into a tool of governance. His ability to inspire confidence — Obama's second book is titled "The Audacity of Hope" — has thus far buffered the president against the harsh political realities of two wars, a global economic meltdown and countless domestic challenges.

But other AP-GfK findings could signal trouble for Obama as he approaches his 100th day in office Wednesday:

■ While there is evidence that

Method for AP-GfK poll

The Associated Press-GfK Poll on President Barack Obama, politics and the economy was conducted by GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media from April 16-20. It is based on land-line and cell-phone telephone interviews with a nationally representative random sample of 1,000 adults. Interviews were conducted with 800 respondents on land-line telephones and 200 on cellular phones.

Digits in the phone numbers dialed were generated randomly to reach households with unlisted and listed land-line and cell-phone numbers. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

As is done routinely in surveys, results were weighted, or adjusted, to ensure that responses accurately reflect the population's makeup by factors such as age, sex, education and race. In addition, the weighting took into account patterns of phone use — land line only, cell only and both types — by region.

No more than one time in 20 should chance variations in the sample cause the results to vary by more than plus or minus 3.1 percentage points from the answers that would be obtained if all adults in the U.S. were polled. There are other sources of potential error in polls, including the wording and order of questions.

The questions and results for this poll are available at: www.ap-gfkipoll.com

people feel more optimistic about the economy, 65 percent said it was difficult for them and their families to get ahead. More than one-third knew of a family member who recently lost a job.

■ More than 90 percent of the Americans surveyed said they considered the economy an important issue, the highest ever in AP polling.

■ Nearly 80 percent said that the rising federal debt would hurt future generations, and Obama received mixed reviews

at best for his handling of the issue.

And yet, the percentage of Americans who said the country was headed in the right direction rose to 48 percent, up from 40 percent in February. Forty-four percent of those surveyed said the nation was on the wrong track.

Not since January 2004, shortly after the capture of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, had an AP survey indicated more "right direction" than

"wrong direction" respondents.

So far, Obama has defied the odds by producing a sustained trend toward optimism. It began with his election.

But he is aware that his political prospects are directly linked to such numbers. If at the end of his term the public is no more assured that Washington is competent and accountable and that the nation is at least on the right track, his re-election prospects could be doubtful.

"I will be held accountable," Obama said a few weeks into his presidency. "You know, I've got four years. . . . If I don't have this done in three years, then there's going to be a one-term proposition."

The AP-GfK poll indicated that 64 percent of those surveyed approved of Obama's job performance, down just slightly from 67 percent in February. President George W. Bush's approval ratings hovered in the high 50s after his first 100 days in office.

But Obama also has become a somewhat polarizing figure, with just 24 percent of the Republicans who were questioned approving of his performance — down from 33 percent in February. Obama campaigned on a promise — just as Bush had — to end the party-first mindset that breeds gridlock in Washington.