

REALITY CHECK
THE POLITICS OF MISTRUST

Angry Female Voters a Growing Force

Third in a series

By Steven Pearlstein
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Remember angry white males? Well, hear now from the women.

They are more likely than men to have become anxious about the economy and distrustful of government—two of the key characteristics of the disaffected voter in recent years, according to a new poll commissioned by The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. Nearly half of all women think the economy is getting worse, while three-quarters believe the government cannot be trusted to do the right thing most of the time.

But what separates men from women in this worried segment of the electorate is that they seem less concerned with their own plight than they are with the economic prospects for their children and their neighbors, including the poor.

"Don't tell me how good things are," declares Jean Stephens, a 49-year-old grandmother in Trenton, N.J. "I'll know the economy's improved when I see the elderly's being taken care of and the homeless are not freezing on the street."

Marie Mackenzie's touchstones are the lower-level clerks and receptionists in the Florida welfare office where she works, women whom she sees falling farther and farther behind. "They treat them like dirt because they

know they can get away with it," says Mackenzie, 48, who escaped a similar fate by going to college 14 years ago while still raising four kids at home.

Marge McCann, 55, measures the level of her economic anxiety by the pile of unpaid bills at the doctors offices around Detroit where she provides management consulting services.

"There are more unemployed people than are showing up in the government statistics," said McCann. "I know—I see them. They've simply given up and dropped out."

And the way Jaclyn Stolzman of Conrad, Iowa, figures it, you can't call it economic progress when it now takes two working

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parents to produce the same lifestyle she and her husband had with one paycheck 25 years ago. That's why she gave up her job as a dental hygienist so that she could take care of her new grandchild while her daughter continued to work.

These four were among the 1,500 Americans who participated in a Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll conducted last month to gauge the depth of voter anger going into this election year.

Counting all respondents—women and men, content and disaffected—the survey found that nearly 38 percent of Americans now believe the economy is getting worse, while 16 percent believe the economy is getting better.

To a degree, the results mirror the fractured nature of the economy's recent performance. Over the last three years, the country has enjoyed three years of low inflation, declining unemployment and steady economic growth. At the same time, however, middle-class Americans have continued to experience little or no growth in their incomes while the working poor have suffered a significant decline in their standard of living.

But the survey results also show that people's attitudes about the economy do not mirror their personal economic condition. As often as not, economic pessimism shows stronger statistical links to other factors, such as distrust of government and other institutions.

Two-thirds of those who think the economy is in decline, for example, blame the federal government for contributing to it. And nearly all of these economic pessimists doubt that the government can or will do much to stop the slide.

This bill of particulars against the government reads right out of the Ross Perot campaign platform: The government hasn't done enough to balance the budget, to keep jobs from going overseas and to create good-paying jobs at home.

But there is also a strong concern in this group—particularly among the women—about the widening gap between the rich and the middle class. And government, they feel, seems to be making it worse by lowering taxes for the wealthy and doing too little for the needy.

In the context of the continuing budget battle in Washington, that concern seems to be making these voters sympathetic to President Clinton; women in general are more supportive of Clinton than men. But veteran pollsters warn that these disaffected voters—at once anxious about the economy and distrustful of government and politicians—are still very much up for grabs in this year's presidential and con-

gressional elections.

"This group needs to see an economic game plan from the next president, and so far they haven't seen one from anyone that they think is acceptable," said pollster Peter Hart. "In that sense, they are swing voters."

"This is probably the most important segment of the electorate in 1996 and they are absolutely up for grabs," agreed Stanley Greenberg, a pollster for the White House and the Democratic Party.

The Post/Kaiser/Harvard survey found that this core of pessimistic and distrustful voters now represents 31 percent of the public. As a group, they are slightly poorer and less educated than the rest of the population and less knowledgeable about current affairs. They are also slightly more independent in registration and conservative in their political ideology.

In the 1992 presidential election, they tilted toward Perot, particularly the men. Two years later many of them deserted Democratic incumbents and stayed home on election day, helping Republicans to pick up a majority in the Congress. And while their confidence in the Clinton administration is low, their confidence in the new Republican Congress is even lower.

But what jumps out from the data on this hard-core group of pessimists and distrusters is that two-thirds of them now are women.

"Women have been working very hard in recent years and have finally succeeded in catching up economically," said Kevin Phillips, the Republican analyst and author of "The Politics of Rich and Poor." "If their optimism is now starting to flag, that's something of a sea-change."

Unlike the "angry men," many of the women have not suffered financially from the widespread restructuring that has swept through the economy, costing many blue-collar workers their jobs and driving down the wages of male workers with high school educations.

Many of the women, by contrast, report that their careers and family finances are in better shape than they have been in years. But their pride at having maneuvered around the shoals of the new economy is tinged with concern that too many others are getting hung up. And government, rather than helping, looks to them to be a big part of the problem.

"The government in Washington has totally forgotten about us," said Myrna Bolo, a 38-year-old housewife and horse breeder who lives in the small town of Ontonagon on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. "It's hard to figure out what they are

doing. You see them on television and they are all talking about stupid things."

This sense of the irrelevance of government, said pollster Greenberg, comes through strongly in the focus groups he conducts regularly.

"These people are battling on the front line of the economy, with some success in many cases. But they aren't so invulnerable that they could fall back at any moment. And in this continuing struggle, they don't sense that government is there for them."

So says Patricia Hall, a nurse from Vallejo, Calif., who decided to take early retirement from San Francisco General

Hospital a few years ago when the city facility was offering incentives as a way of reducing its work force. With her home mortgage nearly paid off, her health insurance and her pension, she says, keep her as comfortable financially as she has ever been.

Her four sons aren't doing badly either. At her insistence, all four graduated from San Francisco State. Now all four have jobs—one is a deputy sheriff, another a lab technician, a third works in the city traffic department while her youngest is in the Navy.

But the pride she takes in describing their successes turns into irritation when she turns her attention to the wider economy.

"Look at the layoffs—AT&T, Apple Computer, Pac Bell," she said. "Look at all the base closings. If you had a booming economy, you wouldn't have that. And if people had jobs, then they wouldn't be out on the street killing and robbing. That's the way I see it."

A similar refrain comes from Sandy

Earison, 40, a management consultant in Denver, Colo. The daughter of two factory workers, Earison said she has made more money than both her parents combined from the first year after she graduated from college. She owns her own home and works for a booming company (US West Inc.) in a booming industry (telecommunications) in a booming region.

So what's her complaint?

"The number of people living in poverty is incredible to me," she said. "Prices are rising, people aren't getting raises. How can anyone look at that and say the economy is getting better?"

This tendency for people to separate their own financial situation from their view of the national economy is not a wholly new phenomenon—political scientists first noticed it during the Depression years of the 1930s.

Stanford University professor Richard Brody, who has studied the connection between economics and voting, said that people tend to link their own situation to



BY ROGER BURDETTE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Jaclyn Stolzman of Conrad, Iowa, gave up her job as a dental hygienist so she could take care of her new grandchild while her daughter continued to work.

a special circumstance or something they personally did or didn't do.

If someone loses a job or fails to get a promotion, Brody explained, they are more likely to blame themselves and get depressed than to blame the economy or politicize the event. But if they hear on the news that electric rates are going up or that their brother-in-law got laid off at an auto plant after 28 years, they get angry or anxious.

"Sitting inside their own living rooms, people are feeling rather comfortable right now," explains Seymour Martin Lipsett, a political scholar at George Mason University. "But through their window on the world, which is television, things outside look rather bleak."

In the global village created by electronic media, a corporate bankruptcy or layoff announcement anywhere in the United States now has the same psychological impact as a layoff or bankruptcy right next door.

Evidence of this far-flung empathy of

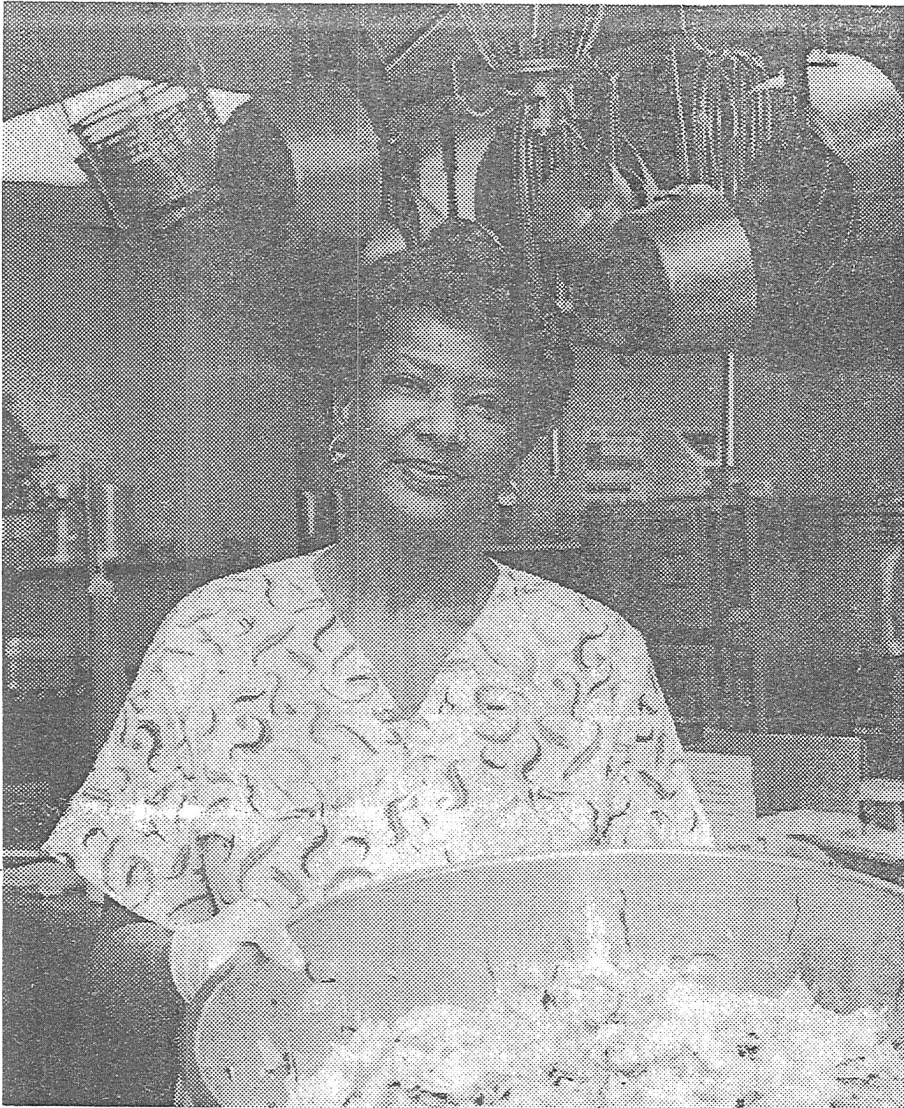
disaffected female voters can be found sprinkled throughout the Post/Kaiser/Harvard study.

Although female voters distrust government and think too much of their tax money is wasted as much as the men, they show little inclination to cut spending on health and pension programs that protect the poor and the elderly.

"Can you believe they are thinking about cutting support for the blind and disabled and school lunches for poor kids," said Hall, the retired nurse. "I never, ever thought that somebody could do this. I mean, how could these people even fix their mouths to say such a thing?"

And when they talk about anxiety over jobs, it is often expressed not in terms of their own prospects, but what is available for young people entering the work force.

"When I had an opportunity to further my education, I didn't, so I'm not complaining," said Stephens, the nursing home worker from Trenton. "But look what happens to the kids today. They go and get a college education and they still



BY CINDY DESAU FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**“Look what happens to the kids today. They go
and get a college education and they still
have to settle for jobs at Burger King.”**

— JEAN STEPHENS, nursing home worker

have to settle for jobs at Burger King. Good jobs seem to be out of reach no matter how much education you have.”

In fact, the plight of college graduates is nowhere near so bleak—the percentage of college graduates in menial jobs seems to have peaked, and the wage premium for a college education is as high as it has ever been and growing. But for those inclined toward a pessimistic view, any instance of a college graduate flipping burgers is likely to take on global significance.

Such stubborn pessimism also manifests itself in beliefs about the economic plight of the elderly. Decades of economic data confirm that poverty rates among se-

nior citizens have been on a steep and steady decline, largely because of government programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, as well as food stamps, subsidized housing, Meals on Wheels and federal protections for private pensions. Yet the Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll found that nearly 60 percent of Americans believe that poverty among the elderly is on the increase, with half of those blaming the federal government for contributing to the problem.

Woe to the politician, however, who tries to talk disgruntled voters out of their economic funk with charts and graphs showing how things are really get-

ting better.

“You remember the Bush recovery? That laid a big egg with people,” reminds Republican strategist Phillips. “And when Clinton tries it with his story of 8 million new jobs and lower interest rates, it has exactly the same effect. People just don’t want to hear it. They want to hear that it’s part good, part bad, but on balance it’s still not acceptable.”

In a recent book, “The Good Life and Its Discontents,” Newsweek columnist Robert Samuelson explores this political conundrum, concluding that it has more to do with unrealistic expectations for the economy than the economy’s actual performance. But even there, he argues, politicians are to blame.

For more than a generation, Samuelson writes, politicians have been shameless in deluding voters (and even themselves) with promises that government could prevent recessions, eliminate poverty, balance budgets without raising taxes and guarantee that each generation will do better than the last. Now that these promises have been exposed as overblown and Americans are being forced to adjust to a more realistic set of economic expectations, politicians are reaping the bitter fruit in the form of heightened voter distrust.

“Some of today’s complaining and contention derive from objective conditions: economic setbacks, crime, disagreements on political or moral issues,” Samuelson writes. “These are all legitimate subjects of concern and debate. But much of our discontent also flows from a feeling of arrested progress and unrealized ambitions: a frustration over what might have been and a bewilderment over why it isn’t.”

Washington Post assistant director of polling Mario A. Brossard contributed to this report.

NEXT: The anti-government electorate

FOR MORE INFORMATION 

To read the full text of *The Post* survey on people’s attitudes toward the government, see *Digital Ink*, *The Post*’s on-line service. To learn about *Digital Ink*, call 202-334-4740.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This survey is the second in a series of polls that The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University are conducting to measure the ways that information shapes how people think and act.

Representatives of the three sponsors worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results on which this series of articles is based. The Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation with Harvard University are publishing independent summaries of the survey findings; each organization bears the sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The Kaiser Family Foundation and The Post paid for the survey and related expenses. The survey data will be sent later this year to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, where computer tapes of the information will be avail-

able. A copy of results from the Post/Kaiser/Harvard survey may be obtained by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation at 1-800-656-4533 and asking for report No. 1110.

A total of 1,514 randomly selected adults were interviewed Nov. 28 to Dec. 4, 1995, for this project. Margin of sampling error for the overall results was plus or minus 3 percentage points and larger when results are based on part of the sample. Sampling error is, however, only one source of error in public opinion polls. Telephone interviewing for this survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates of Princeton, N.J.

Additional results reported in these articles were based on questions asked on other national surveys with samples of about 1,000 each conducted by ICR Research of Media, Pa.