Poll: In 2012, it can only get better

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WASHINGTON — Americans are hopeful for what 2012 will bring for their families and the country, according to a new Associated Press-GfK poll, though most say 2011 was a year they would rather forget.

Nearly seven in 10 say the year gone by was a bad one, more than double those who consider it a success, according to the poll. But 62 percent are optimistic about what 2012 will bring for the nation, and more, 78 percent, are hopeful about the year their family will have in 2012.

Jeff Wolfe, 33, of Farmington, W.Va., said 2011 treated him well because he was able to find steady work as a lineman. But for the rest of the nation, things were "pretty rough," with so many Americans looking for jobs, he noted.

"For the first time since 2009, I worked all year," he said. Wolfe said he lost work in 2008 and again in 2010. But in 2011, the father of two school-age children said he was able to catch up on bills, buy his wife a new car and renovate his home.

Overall, the poll found 68 percent of Americans described 2011 as a bad year, compared with 29 percent who felt it was a good one.

A partisan divide, much like the one that ruled Washington this year, seems the only split in public opinion on 2011. Democrats were most likely to view 2011 positively (40 percent called it good), while independents and Republicans were less effusive.

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Beyond that, the poll found general agreement that 2011 is best left in the past.

Mary Burke, 57, of Ridgeland, S.C., felt economic pain in 2011. She saw prices rise for all of her expenses, from her light bill to groceries. "Paying $5 for a jar of mayonnaise is outrageous," she said.

Food and gas prices surged in 2011, but the most recent Consumer Price Index shows inflation leveling off. November statistics from the government showed a year-over-year inflation rate of 3.4 percent, the smallest such rise since April.

The AP-GfK poll found consumers are sensing the change. Just 18 percent of adults expect consumer prices to rise at a faster pace in the coming year, the lowest share to say so since the poll first asked the question in March. Most (51 percent) expect prices to rise at the same rate or more slowly.

And as the nation's economic fortunes overall appear to be tilting slightly positive, the public's expectations for the economy in the coming year are at their highest point since spring. According to the poll, 37 percent expect economic improvement in the next 12 months, compared with 24 percent who think the economy will slide downhill. That's the first time since May that significantly more people said things will get better than get worse.

On a personal level, 36 percent think their household's financial situation will improve over the next 12 months, while 11 percent think it will worsen. Americans' financial ebbs and flows affect their personal outlook for 2012. Those whose households have faced a job loss in the past six months or who describe their current financial situation as poor are less optimistic about what 2012 holds for them and their families than others, though that does not carry over to their forecast for the nation in 2012.

Optimism about the nation's path varies with views of the economy's direction. Those who say things have looked better in the past month are generally optimistic (79 percent), while just half of those who say things are getting worse feel positive about what 2012 holds for the country. And about 6 in 10 of those who distrust the two major political parties to handle the economy or job creation are pessimistic about how 2012 will turn out for the nation.

Burke said she is angered by politicians in Washington who she believes fail to look out for the interests of the American people.

"They don't care about me and you," she said. "They only care how they are going to line their pockets." As for the economy and nation improving in 2012, she said, "I pray and hope."

The partisan divide in impressions of 2011 persists in the outlook for 2012, with Democrats more optimistic than either Republicans or independents. But expectations for next year's presidential contest appear not to be a factor. Most partisans on both sides foresee victory for their side in the November 2012 presidential election: Three-quarters of Democrats say they think President Barack Obama will win re-election; three-quarters of Republicans say he will not.

The Associated Press-GfK Poll was conducted Dec. 8 through 12 by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications. It involved landline and cell phone interviews with 1,000 adults nationwide and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.