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In the same poll, 66 percent of respondents cited the economy as their leading worry. Adler and Runyan may be talking less about the economy and more about each other in an attempt to pull their core supporters to the polls, said Sharon Schulman, executive director of the college's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, which conducted the survey.

Concern about jobs can be found in almost every poll about issues important to voters. A Gallup poll earlier this year captured the intensity: About one-third of Americans listed jobs as the nation's most important problem, the highest level since 1983, when the country was just coming out of a deep recession. A Quinnipiac University poll this summer found respondents favored reducing unemployment over reducing the deficit by a 2-1 ratio.

It's easy to see why anxiety is so high. The unemployment rate has reached its highest levels since the early 1980s. More than 6 million people have been unemployed for six months or more, a record. The "real" unemployment rate — which counts the 11 million people who have stopped looking for work or are working part-time because they have to — is about 17 percent.

The poverty rate is the highest since the mid-1990s. The number of people without health insurance is at a record high.

Nearly nine in 10 workers who are employed worry about job security, and many jobless Americans are increasingly pessimistic about the economy rebounding quickly, according to a Labor Day poll by Rutgers University's John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.

Workers blame Bush and Obama for the economic malaise and point to global competition, illegal immigration and Wall Street banks as the three main reasons why the U.S. is losing jobs, the survey showed.

A number of jobless New Jerseyans have given up on finding conventional work. Out of desperation, some are finding consultant positions or are starting their own businesses, said Katie DeVito, founder of the online resource njunemployed.com.

"If they are not getting a job and their unemployment (benefits) end, what are they going to do?" she said.

In August, the U.S. and New Jersey unemployment rates were the same — 9.6 percent. The preliminary jobless rate that month was 9.2 percent in Burlington County, 9.4 percent in Ocean County and 10.6 percent in Camden County, according to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development. The 3rd District includes almost all of Burlington and Ocean counties and Cherry Hill in Camden County.

Of the 8 million jobs lost nationwide since peak employment in December 2007, more than half were gone by the time Obama was inaugurated.

Mark Zandi, an economic adviser to Republican presidential candidate John McCain and House Democrats, concluded this summer that the \$814 billion stimulus package - along with the Troubled Asset Relief Program aimed at bailing out banks and other government actions in the financial markets — ended the recession and prevented a depression. He calculated the actions added about 2.7 million jobs. Other independent assessments mirror that result.

"We'd be in an immeasurably worse place if not for the stimulus," Zandi said.

Other initiatives, such as the Cash for Clunkers program, which encouraged new car purchases, and the home-buyer purchase tax credit also boosted economic activity, although some say they simply accelerated decisions to buy cars and homes without creating new demand.

But factual evidence that government intervention helped isn't what matters.

"It's really more about what the public perception is," said Glen Bolger, a Republican pollster.

Many people still don't believe the recession is over, no matter what statistics may say.

Bolger described the public's attitude this way: "It's not over until we say it's over."

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