

Clock ticking for Obama amid slowing U.S. economic improvement

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Xinhua) -- The clock is ticking for U.S. President Barack Obama to show voters he is steering the country toward recovery as the economy climbs out of the recession at a reduced clip, experts said Tuesday.

"Unemployment needs to drop below 8 percent for the president to be able to say things are headed in the right direction and that he deserves credit for the economic turnaround," said Darrell M. West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution of the voters' primary concern this election season.

And with a jobless rate of 8.1 percent, many Americans are not thrilled about the way the president has handled the economy.

Still, a Gallup poll released on Tuesday found that economic confidence surpassed a major barrier last week, passing -17 for the first time in the four-plus years of Gallup Daily tracking in the U.S. The index now stands at -16 for the week ending May 20, up from -18 in each of the prior two weeks in May, and from -21 in late April.

But despite the gains, the index remains in negative territory. Forty-three percent say the economy is getting better and 52 percent say it is getting worse amid slowing economic progress in recent months.

Without markedly improved real-world economic news, such as a solid May unemployment report, which is due out next month, it is unclear what could help jump-start another rally in confidence, Gallup said.

John Fortier, director of the democracy project at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said while it is not too late for Obama to change the opinions of voters regarding the economy's health, time is running out.

Indeed, political scientists look at the first six to nine months of the year as an important indication of electoral strength, and last minute news matters little.

And with the elections coming in November, Obama has only a few months to turn things around in the minds of voters.

On the jobs front, the outlook looks grim for the president.

Workers continued to drop out of the U.S. labor force in April due to sluggish hiring as the economy claws its way toward recovery from the worst downturn in decades.

While the jobless rate slid to 8.1 percent from March's 8.2 percent, the fall was due to more people giving up on the job hunt -- the unemployment rate only counts those actively seeking work -- amid frustration over their not-so-promising job prospects, economists said.