Economy is No. 1 election issue for Florida voters

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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MIRAMAR

— Forget gay marriage. Put aside the war in Afghanistan. Ignore illegal immigration. All are dwarfed by the big gorilla of 2012 — the economy.

Election 2012 is all about the economy — especially jobs — the one issue with the power to determine if President Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney wins Florida's critical electoral votes and, perhaps, the presidency.

"That's the No. 1 priority," said Jansew Sang, of Hollywood.

Laid off in 2009 from her job as Latin America sales manager for a manufacturer of networking devices, she's still relatively fortunate, being able to work as a translator and banking consultant. "I have the advantage of being able to keep myself afloat in this economy," she said.

Sang is an independent — the kind of voter coveted by every candidate because independents decide close elections. She voted for Obama in 2008, but hasn't decided if she'll vote for him or Romney this year.

She was among 646 people seeking work last week at a career fair in Miramar along with city residents Jenni Ressler and Jim Richardson. Like Sang, they're swing voters and haven't decided which candidate will get their votes this year.

Richardson, out of work since August 2011, said jobs are the issue in 2012. And Ressler, who's been looking for two months, said the economy "would play a big role, obviously."

Jobs are a salient issue for many more people than the 9 percent of Floridians who were unemployed in March — when the jobless rate was again higher than the national average and the percentage of people with jobs was 43rd in the country. New state unemployment numbers, for April, are due out Friday.

Dave Welch, who lives west of Boca Raton, said he feels the employment squeeze — even though he still has his job as a copier mechanic.

"I know several people who have lost their jobs: good, hard-working people who have lost their jobs because the economy is in the tank," he said. "We're not selling the products that we have in the past, therefore we don't need the people that we've had. It's been a cascading effect."
He blames Obama and the Democrats, and decided long ago to vote for Romney, even though the Republican candidate isn't as conservative as he'd like.

Welch's concerns about jobs are far from unique. A Suffolk University/WSVN-Ch. 7 poll conducted last week found 81 percent of Florida voters said the state's job outlook is poor or fair. Just 13 percent termed it good or excellent. More than 80 percent believe the state is still mired in a recession.

And 52 percent of the 600 Florida voters surveyed rated the economy as the most important issue facing the country. None of the other nine issues came anywhere close, a finding Suffolk polling director David Paleologos termed "amazing."

Troy Samuels, a Miramar city commissioner, Republican Party committeeman and co-chairman of Romney's campaign in Broward County, said there isn't a single event he's attended in the past three years when at least one person hasn't asked him for job leads.

He said even plenty of people with a job are concerned about what the near future might bring. "If there's a bump in the economy … will my company all of a sudden lay off 100 people, and I'm one of those 100?" he said. "Those are still serious concerns in the minds of people no matter what party they're from, and they think about it every single day."

And those kind of worries have a big impact on elections if "the unemployment rate gets reported and people sort of look around and say things don't look so good," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. And that's bad for incumbents.

Conflicting trends mark the all-important unemployment picture, said Xu Cheng, senior economist at Moody's Analytics, a leading independent economic forecasting firm.

From 2010 to today, the Florida unemployment rate has come down more than 2 percentage points, "In normal times, this would be great," the economist said. "In normal times, if we put this variable in the [election forecasting] model, Obama would win Florida for sure."

But there's another factor in play: A state unemployment rate higher than 8 percent produces the "grumpy voter effect," Cheng said. "Despite Florida's relatively strong recovery in the last two years, given that Florida unemployment figures will still be very high — and we believe at the time of the election it will still be about 9 percent — we believe this grumpy voter effect will kick in."

That means Floridians are much less likely than normal to give the president any credit for the decline in the unemployment rate, he said.

Meanwhile, the University of Florida's consumer confidence index fell to 74 in April, marking a three-month downward trend.

"Confidence is better than it was last year — but it's declining," said Chris McCarty, director of the Survey Research Center at the UF Bureau of Economic and Business Research.
But the picture isn't all dire for Obama.

While the Suffolk poll shows people don't have tremendous confidence in the president's ability to fix the economy, voters also aren't sold on Romney's ability either, despite the Republican's insistence that his background as a business executive gives him the right economic stuff. Asked which candidate is better equipped to repair the economy, the president got 40 percent and Romney, 42 percent.

Obama also can talk about achievements like the successful government bailout of General Motors, which Romney opposed, Wagner said. "It's not as if the economy is only a Romney issue," he said. "I'm sure Mitt Romney doesn't want to talk about GM."

More glimmers of hope: The Miramar job fair had half the job seekers and more employers than the one held in March 2011. Unlike last year, said Mayor Lori Moseley, the line didn't snake around the building. And, she said, more of the potential employers this time were actually ready to hire people.

State Rep. Lori Berman, D-Delray Beach, who sponsored a November jobs fair that attracted 800 people to the Hagen Ranch Road Library west of Delray Beach, said "there has been some slight recovery and we are seeing a few more people getting jobs."

Even some South Floridians without work said they are willing to cut the president some slack. "It's improving. I think I might vote to give Obama another chance" said James Cucci, of Hallandale Beach, who earlier this year lost his job manufacturing countertops after more than 25 years because work dried up.

Still, with almost six months left until Election Day, Wagner said it's too early to predict which candidate will be helped or hurt by the economy. "How they judge the economy can change a lot, depending on what's dominating the news cycle," the political scientist said.

The Moody's model examining state-level economic data predicts a tight-as-can-be race in Florida, which awards 29 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency. It's now predicting Romney as the Florida winner, but Cheng said that could easily move back and forth between now and Nov. 6, Election Day.

"Florida is probably a true toss-up in the sense that there is a very, very close tie between the two party's candidates," Cheng said. "If you look at the projected share of the two parties, it's almost 50-50. They almost have an equal chance of winning the state."