Americans plan to maintain their level of charitable giving

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By Jessica Durando, USA TODAY

Americans who donate to charity intend to keep their level of giving about the same this holiday season despite the lagging economy, a national survey released today shows.

About 62% of donors said they would match last year's levels, and 10% report they'll give more, according to a poll conducted for the Red Cross by the polling company Caravan.

Americans appear more willing to trim their budgets on other holiday expenses such as travel, decorations, parties or gifts to loved ones. About 70% are poised to spend less on at least one of those things, the survey found.

Only 23% said they would give less to charity.

"It's clearly people making priorities with regard to their spending," said Neal Litvack, chief development officer at the Red Cross. "We are finding people are inclined to get into the holiday spirit by giving."

More than half said the state of the economy has made it more important to give this year.

John Havens, associate director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, said he thinks people are feeling a greater identification with others in need because they have also been affected by the recession.

"I think people are concerned with others and are concerned that it is a tough time," Havens said. "It is not necessarily that they are going to give a lot more."

Fifty-one percent said they know someone who had been laid off, and 40% know someone who lost money in the stock market. About one in five said they had their own salary or work hours reduced.

CEO Robert Ottenhoff of GuideStar USA, which collects data on charities, said Americans, though feeling generous, may not be able to give at the same levels as before the recession. "There is positive news about attitude toward giving. It also confirms people are still worried," Ottenhoff said. "I think it still leaves open the question of how much will Americans be contributing to charitable organizations during this giving season."

Una Osili, research director at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, said the predictions could change based on how the economy looks by year's end. Total charitable giving fell 3.6% in 2009, according to the Giving

By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

A donor drops money into a Salvation Army bucket outside a Clifton, Va., store in 2009.
USA Foundation's annual philanthropy report.

"I think it is fair to say that intentions do matter. However, personal economics really affect what someone does," Osili said. "To actually see what happens, we will have to go back and look at end-of-the-year receipts from non-profits and what donors actually report."

The Oct. 21-24 poll of 1,005 adults has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.