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Bloomberg ® Consumer Comfort Index ™ Weekly Analysis

Embargoed for Release after 9:45 a.m. Thursday, April 10, 2014

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Americans' ratings of their personal finances slipped to their lowest in five months this week, possibly reflecting the impact of rising gasoline prices. The shift leaves the weekly Bloomberg Consumer Comfort Index struggling outside of its recovery zone.

At -31.9 on its scale of -100 to +100, the CCI is down 4.3 points from its 2014 high of -27.6 a month ago, and has been stuck below its recovery zone, the -20s, for three weeks straight, after a month on the good side of that line. It's now numerically its lowest in two months.

The index has made several forays into the -20s since breaking through that barrier a year ago for the first time since January 2008, and the first quarter of this year was its best Q1 since 2007. But momentum's been in short supply, with the CCI moving in a fairly narrow 5.5-point range (-33.1 to -27.6) in the first 14 weeks of the year. And it's still far from its long-term average, -16.5 in more than 28 years of weekly polls.

While the economy added a solid 192,000 jobs in March, unemployment remains at 6.7 percent, with long-term joblessness still disconcertingly high. Moreover, as noted, gasoline is up sharply, climbing 40 cents since early November to $3.60 per gallon. Unemployment and rising gas prices both strongly negatively correlate with consumer sentiment.

The CCI, produced for Bloomberg by Langer Research Associates, is based on Americans' views of the national economy, the buying climate and their personal finances, with all three in negative territory this week:

- Although it's the best of the three subindices, the personal finances subindex, at -2.9, is on the wrong side of zero for only the second time in 20 weeks, and its worst since the beginning of November.

- The buying climate subindex sits at -39.1, its lowest in a month and dangerously close to falling back in the -40s after rising as high as -32.0 at the start of this year. Struggles in both personal finance and buying climate assessments help explain softness in revolving consumer credit.

- Consistently at the bottom of the pile is the economy subindex, -53.8 this week, its lowest in nearly two months. Improvement in views of the economy earlier this year was an encouraging sign, but the subindex has been back in the -50s the past three weeks.

The economy, personal finances and buying climate subindices are 22.2, 13.5 and 10.5 points, respectively, off their long-term averages.

Several groups hit recent lows this week. Most notably, at -37.4, the index among Midwesterners is its worst since early February 2013.

The CCI's its lowest since November among women (-38.1), homeowners (-27.0) and full-time workers (-25.3), while relatively stable among their counterparts. It's its worst since November among whites as well (-33.3), but simultaneously its best since late August among blacks (-31.3), bringing blacks numerically ahead of whites for the first time in more than seven months.

Difficulties among middle- to upper-middle-income earners brings the index in $50,000-plus households to its lowest in more than four months, -9.5. That's despite its comparatively high level, +14.1, among $100,000-plus earners. Across the income spectrum it's -62.9, its lowest since mid-February, among those with household incomes less than $15,000 a year.

Political allegiance continues to color economic sentiment, with the CCI among Democrats much higher than its level among Republicans (-15.9 vs. -42.2), marking the second-largest Democratic-over-Republican gap in available data since mid-1990. (The highest was two weeks ago.) The CCI among political independents (-37.7) is its worst since late November, nearly as weak as its level among Republicans.

Click here for CCI details.
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