

The POLITICO-GW Battleground Poll

September 2010

Democratic Strategic Analysis:

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This week's primaries demonstrated once again that conventional wisdom is often wrong. This poll shows similarly that the mounting rhetoric predicting the demise of the Democrats is premature. It is a volatile and challenging environment for both Parties. This new poll shows opportunities for Democrats and shows that what we have is a real battleground indeed. Democrats' difficulties have been catalogued relentlessly, but that doesn't tell the complete story. Our poll shows a few weapons in their arsenal that can lead to victory.

- They are tied in the generic congressional vote even with a conservative turnout model. There is still an enthusiasm gap that the Democrats must deal with, but that gap is significantly less than it was in April.
- The good news is that the Democrats get to run against Republicans who have even lower approval ratings than they do, including among independent voters.
- The Democrats have a President and Vice President who have more personal popularity than any other national political figures in Washington.
- The President's job approval numbers have leveled off, and he has the personal popularity that still gives him a platform from which voters will want to hear what he has to say.
- Most important, Democrats have compelling arguments on which Party policies are to blame for the economy, which Party can create jobs, and which Party can turn the economy around. Democrats must, however, seize this opportunity and define an economic agenda.

In sum, the Democrats have real opportunities, and they have an opposition with serious liabilities of its own. This survey reveals the key fact that the Democrats are not facing the rejuvenated, freshly-branded, Contract-With-America era Republican Party of 1994; they are facing a Party still tarnished by the multiple—and recent—calamities of Bush economics, the war in Iraq, Sarah Palin, and an over-the-top and increasingly frightening Tea Party movement. The reality is that the election isn't over by a long shot, and the Democrats still have ample opportunity to maintain their majority and keep the Republican victory laps to a minimum on November 2nd.

The Political Context

At this point, it is an unfortunate and unavoidable reality that voters remain frustrated and discouraged with the direction in which the country is headed, and eager for change. More than three-in-five (62%) think we're on the wrong track, up from 55% in April. To be sure, this metric is in considerably better shape than it was in the waning Bush years—in late 2008, just 18% thought we were going in the right direction and 75% said we were on the wrong track—but Americans are running out of patience. Though Democrats are more optimistic (if not overwhelmingly so, at 52% right direction / 37% wrong track), and Republicans are predictably apoplectic (7% / 88%), the real worry for those arguing against a third consecutive change election is the mood of independents. Just 21% of independents say the country is headed in the right direction, while 61% say we're off on the wrong track. The outstanding question is whether those independents are willing to give the Democrats more time to get the country back on track or whether they are going to endorse Republican policies that they had so recently (and resoundingly) repudiated.

Cordoba-related distractions notwithstanding, the most important issue this election cycle is of course the economy. Too many Americans are still hurting in this economy, too many worried about their future, their children's future, their parents' future, their country's future. Consequently 46% of voters list "the economy and jobs" as their top issue they want Congress to address. This is up from our survey in April (39%) and from this point in the last election cycle (26%). Democrats, African-Americans, voters age 35-44, and college-graduates are especially likely to say this is their top priority. Government spending follows at 13%, with Republicans, conservatives, and voters in the Midwest especially likely to highlight this as their highest concern, though it remains behind the economy and jobs in every case.

Establishing the storyline for voters when it comes to the economic morass, and how best to extricate ourselves from it, is critical. A plurality of voters (25%) still holds George W. Bush most responsible for the current state of the economy. In comparison, Barack Obama's name doesn't appear until fourth on the list, at 11%, after "Large financial firms" (20%) and "The U.S. Congress" (15%). While Democrats aim their fire at George W. Bush and Republicans split their fire between Congress and Barack Obama, independents are populist and most likely to assign fault to the Republican allies on Wall Street who fund the GOP's campaigns. A plurality of independents (27%) say large financial firms are to blame, followed by "global economic forces" (13%), Bush (13%), and Congress (11%). Just 6% say Obama is to blame. Among undecided voters on the generic congressional ballot, 19% say financial institutions are most to blame, 17% blame global economic forces, 13% blame Congress, 12% blame Bush, 12% blame the normal economic cycle, and just 3% blame Obama.

For Democrats, mere critique will not be enough to win. However, they should not—and cannot—run away from their economic policy efforts to date, the focus in

these elections must be on the future, not the past. Voters do not believe the stimulus legislation is working; just 37% agree, while 54% disagree (including 41% strongly.) Democrats who want to hold on to their seats are going to need to be specific in describing how their districts benefited from their specific actions on jobs, but in the face of continued dissatisfaction and growing frustration, they must offer a prospective economic agenda as well.

The Images of the Players

Barack Obama's image is complex. Voters approve of him personally (65% approve, 25% disapprove, compared to 69%/21% in April) and have a favorable impression of him (53% favorable, 44% unfavorable, compared to 54%/42% in April). Voters are split on Obama's job performance, which is down slightly from April but up from the lows of this summer. Aside from Democrats, those who are most likely to approve of the job Obama is doing include African Americans, Latinos (especially Latina women), voters under 34, union households, voters in urban areas, single voters and younger women. Aside from Republicans, those most likely to disapprove include voters in the South Central U.S. or the Central Plains, seniors over 60, white men, and high school graduates. Independents, who are a crucial bellwether in this and any election, disapprove of the President by a 37% to 47% margin, down from 46% to 50% in April. These numbers are similar for undecided voters on the congressional ballot as well.

Obama can play a central role in mobilizing voters and defining the stakes for the American people. There are two undeniable realities in the 2010 races: 1) this is a national election and no one commands attention like the President of the United States, and 2) President Obama is the most popular national figure in the national political arena (53% favorable to 44% unfavorable). The same cannot be said for the other elected leaders tested, Republican or Democratic. Vice President Joe Biden is the one other figure tested whose image is not negative; 46% have a favorable impression of the Vice President, compared to 40% who have an unfavorable impression. Among Democrats, Obama's favorability is 90% and Biden's is 77%. Obama's favorability is even higher among groups who are least enthusiastic about the election, including young Democrats (93%) and African-Americans (97%), and is also higher than average among unmarried women (66%).

President Obama currently loses a trial heat narrowly against a generic Republican candidate, 46% to 42%, with 12% undecided. However, the liabilities of potential candidates like Sarah Palin or Newt Gingrich will almost certainly make this a more competitive race when that blank is filled in.

The Images of the Parties and Congress

Of course, the most damaged brand doesn't belong to individual politicians in Washington. It belongs to Congress overall. Just 25% approve of the job Congress has done this year (9% strongly), while 64% disapprove (47% strongly); among independents, just 18% approve and 65% disapprove. This is down from the already-low ratings in April, where 24% approved and 68% disapproved. Notably, the Republicans in Congress (26% approve, 58% disapprove) have an even lower rating than the Democrats in Congress (34% approve, 57% disapprove). This is also true among undecided voters and independents.

The issue environment is more mixed. On six issues tested, voters clearly selected the Republicans in Congress on three, and the remaining three are essentially tied or within the margin of error. Unsurprisingly, the Republicans in Congress draw commanding advantages on their traditional strongholds: which Party will be better at "controlling wasteful spending" (+14 advantage for the GOP), "holding down taxes" (+27 GOP), and "controlling the deficit" (+17 GOP). However, on the issue of the day—the economy—voters are divided. They are within the margin of error on which Party will be better at "turning the economy around", "sharing your values" and "creating jobs." Democrats should take note that they cannot and should not concede these dimensions; the public is still debating the merits of both Parties on these issues. Independents are close on these issues as well, only narrowly favoring the GOP (+4 on "turning the economy around" and "creating jobs", +2 on "sharing your values").

Who Will Better Handle This Issue: the GOP in Congress or the Dems in Congress?				
Issue	All-Sept '10	All-Apr '10	Inds-Sept '10	Inds-Apr '10
<i>Turning the economy around</i>	GOP +2	DEM +6	GOP +4	DEM +5
<i>Controlling wasteful spending</i>	GOP +14	GOP +12	GOP +23	GOP +22
<i>Holding down taxes</i>	GOP +27	GOP +28	GOP +38	GOP +29
<i>Sharing your values</i>	EVEN	DEM +5	GOP +2	GOP +6
<i>Creating jobs</i>	EVEN	DEM +8	GOP +4	DEM +3
<i>Controlling the deficit</i>	GOP +17	GOP +9	GOP +31	GOP +14

Voters are still making up their minds when it comes to which Party will better deliver on jobs and the economy. Congress' poor image means that, to be successful, individual Democratic candidates need to put their qualifications and priorities up against those of their opponents, rather than defending an unpopular status quo.

The Ballot

The nationwide generic Congressional ballot could not be closer. With fewer than two months remaining in the election season, 43% choose a Republican, 43% choose a Democrat, and 15% are undecided; this is relatively unchanged since April, when Republicans led by 2 (42% to 40%, 18% undecided).

At first blush, the internal patterns look familiar to what we've seen in most recent competitive elections. The gender gap is alive and well, with women supporting the Democrat (49% Dem to 35% GOP) nearly as much as men are supporting the Republican (51% GOP to 36% Dem). The youngest voters (under 35) are most supportive of the Democrat (54% Dem to 34% GOP), voters 65 and older are most supportive of the Republican (52% GOP, 33% Dem), with voters in the middle remaining a competitive battleground (Republicans lead by 1 among voters 35-44; Democrats lead by 3 among voters 45-64). White voters are solidly behind a Republican candidate (51% GOP to 34% Dem), while African American voters (87% Dem to 3% GOP) and Latino voters (54% Dem to 32% GOP) lean Democratic. And both sides are bringing their Parties' candidates home in equal measure; 87% of Democrats choose the Democrat while 87% of Republicans choose the Republican. These trends all point to a competitive generic nationwide congressional ballot.

Of course, on Election Day there is no such thing as a generic nationwide Congressional ballot. There are at least three major concerns Democrats must address that the closeness of the ballot obscures:

- The biggest issue for Democratic campaigns, as they head into GOTV season, will be keeping their bases energized. Among those who are extremely likely to vote, the Republican candidate has a 6-point lead (46% GOP to 40% Dem); those who just say they are "very likely" (46% Dem to 42% GOP) or "somewhat likely" (49% Dem to 22% GOP) are much more in the Democratic camp. Democratic campaigns must give their base supporters, as well as those who drop-off in midterm elections, a reason to turn out and a clear understanding of what's at stake in the election.
- Looking at this another way, 65% of Democrats are extremely likely to vote compared to 69% of Republicans. In April, the gap was 76% for Republicans to 62% for Democrats. This enthusiasm gap among Democrats is greatest among younger Democrats and Democratic men. There is also a large enthusiasm gap among the youngest voters, African-Americans, Latinos, unmarried voters, and non-college educated voters.
- Democrats will also need to work harder to pull independents over to their side; currently fewer than one-in-four (24%) independents choose the Democrat on the generic ballot, while 29% choose the Republican and 47% are undecided. Independents believe the country is on the wrong track and disapprove of the President, but they are more critical of the Republicans in Congress than they are of the Democrats in Congress.
- Holding more seats inevitably means playing more defense, and the regional dynamics are also challenging; the Republicans tend to lead in the regions where

there are more competitive seats up for grabs, while Democrats lead in places like the Northeast where they already hold most seats.

In short, the Democrats still have work to do if they expect to maintain control of Congress, limit their electoral losses, and begin repairing their image as they seek to improve their electoral fortunes in 2012. This requires communicating the urgency of this election to the base, reminding independents of the failures of Republican policies, and not ceding the dimension of change to the Republicans.

And despite the work that the Democrats still have in front of them to maintain their majority, the ballot should serve as a reminder to the Republicans that voters are *not* yet as convinced as are the Tea Partiers. Voters have doubts about both sides, and consequently are still very split on in which direction they want the country headed.

The Bottom Line

Ultimately, the remaining weeks will be a true test of how well the Republicans are able to live up to their hype. The Party has many enviable tools at its disposal, including an energized base, an unpopular Congress to run against, and the uncanny ability to deny any responsibility for the economic conditions they created for the American people. But they have not yet closed the deal, and likely will not without a clear, substantive agenda for moving the country forward—one that can help redefine their own tarnished brand. Voters are still mixed on which Party is best for the economy, which Party reflects the values of average Americans, and ultimately which Party should lead Congress. No matter the outcome of the November elections, however, the GOP's vulnerabilities are significant enough that even a re-packaged "Contract with America" will not be able to paper over them all; the cracks and fissures that are pulling the Party apart from within form an existential crisis of sorts, which will need to be addressed in earnest sooner rather than later. Democratic candidates should not waste one precious moment between now and the fall relishing the Republicans' follies, however. Democrats must do a far better job of setting the narrative framework for voters who are discouraged and, more important, who have lost a solid understanding of how our country arrived at this moment of crisis and what's at stake for the American people if the Party that created the crisis is allowed to take control again. With little time left to turn the ship around, it is imperative that Democrats connect—rhetorically and substantively—with Americans who are struggling, always placing their accomplishments in the larger context of the past and the future, and ensure that Americans know how much there is still to lose if the Republicans win big this November.
