



Competitive midterm landscape for Democrats **By Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Matt Price**

With just over five weeks left until the midterm elections, the most recent POLITICO/George Washington University Battleground poll shows a competitive, if challenging, landscape for Democrats, with plenty of potential to frame the debate, halt Republican momentum, and retain control of both Houses of Congress. Republicans appear to have opened up a narrow lead on the generic Congressional race since our mid-September survey. Moreover, the underlying political dynamics are complicated for the GOP as they seek to earn the trust of the American people: their most recognized leaders are remarkably unpopular, they trail Democrats in Congress narrowly on dimensions of the economy and unemployment, and as we noted in our last analysis, voters are more critical of the Republicans in Congress than they are of the Democrats, a finding that holds true among independent voters as well. In short, these midterm elections are much more competitive than they are often described. And with Democrats only now staging their offense, the central choice that will define this election has yet to take shape.

The generic congressional ballot is close, despite a notable shift in the Republicans' favor: 47% of voters prefer the Republican candidate compared to 42% who prefer the Democratic candidate. This movement from the last survey, in which the Parties were tied with 43% apiece, can largely be attributed to women. The widening gender gap shows women selecting a generic Democrat by just 5 points (48% Dem to 43% GOP), down from a 14-point lead in mid-September. Men continue to prefer the Republican by 16 points (52% GOP to 36% Dem), virtually unchanged from the last survey. Voters under 45 support the Democrat by 5 points (with voters under 30 especially supportive), while voters 45-64 and seniors afford the Republican double-digit advantages (+11 and +13, respectively), with the most notable movement taking place among the pre-retirement age cohort (those between 45-64), who supported the Democrats by 3 points two weeks ago. While not tested in this survey, this makes contrasts on Social Security and Medicare very important.

Just one-in-three White voters are supporting the Democrat, while 57% choose a Republican—a slight widening of the margin from the last poll. At the same time, African American voters (91% Dem, 3% GOP) and Latino voters (60% Dem, 26% GOP) remain solidly in the Democrats' camp and have only intensified their support over the past two weeks; their support means GOTV is absolutely critical for the Democrats. Independents remain a competitive battleground as always: they currently select the Republican by 38% to 32% with 30% undecided, largely in line with the 5-point margin

independents afforded the GOP candidate in the last poll, and with enough undecideds to decide the outcome of the race.

The biggest concern for Democrats right now is the enthusiasm gap between their likely supporters and the GOP's likely supporters. While both Parties are converting their bases (86% of Democrats and 92% of Republicans voting for their Party's candidate), 69% of Republicans and 70% of independents say they are *extremely* likely to vote, compared to just 56% of Democrats who say the same (down from 65% in our last survey). This is one of the very rare elections where independents are more enthusiastic than Democrats. Democratic-leaning groups, whose enthusiasm on the ground and at the polls made a dramatic difference for our side just two short years ago, are discouraged, with 18-29 year-olds (56% extremely likely), African-Americans (58%), Latinos (36%), and unmarried women (56%) much less enthusiastic about voting than their more conservative counterparts. While neither side can afford to neglect independents, midterm elections are about base intensity. Democrats will not win if they don't stand tall and give their most loyal supporters a reason to show up.

Congress' approval rating remains dismal (27% approve and 67% disapprove, similar to our last poll). Though it is little consolation, this is not an indictment of Democrats as much as it is an expression of frustration and anger toward *both* Parties; in fact, our last survey showed voters disapproving of the Republicans in Congress even more than they disapproved of the Democrats. The public's lack of confidence in the Republicans is underscored by the Democrats' narrow lead turning the economy around (46% Dems in Congress, 44% GOP in Congress) and creating jobs (45% Dems, 44% GOP). Because the jury is still out on which Party is better able to put the economy back on track, it remains as critical as ever for Democrats to remind voters how, and under whose tenure, we lost 8 million jobs in the first place, and the effects of doubling down on those same economic policies that Republicans promise if they regain control.

Undoubtedly, the contempt toward the Parties is fueling the Tea Party movement, which looks quite popular by comparison (43% favorable and 35% unfavorable among all voters, 44%/36% among independents). There is an enormous gender gap among independents; independent men are net favorable by double digits (52% favorable, 34% unfavorable), while independent women are net unfavorable by double digits (30%, 41%).

Voters' displeasure with the status quo notwithstanding, President Obama remains relatively popular, especially when measured against other political figures. Of the nine national political figures tested, he is the only one who is viewed favorably by a majority of voters (54%), and voters continue to approve of the President personally by a large margin (65% approve, 25% disapprove). His job approval numbers are weaker of course (46% approve and 51% disapprove, modestly down from 45%/48% in our last survey), though he is in better shape than either Clinton or Reagan were at comparable points in their terms. Independents are more negative on the job the President is doing

(42% approve, 53% disapprove), though they continue to have faith in him personally (51% favorable, 46% unfavorable). President Obama will be essential in helping shape the narrative, frame the contrast with the opposition, and shore up the less-enthused Democratic supporters who helped sweep him into office in 2008. Among Democrats, his favorability (91% favorable, 8% unfavorable) and job approval (83% approve, 15% disapprove) are through the roof.

However, while the President's popularity is a valuable asset for the Democrats, there has been an undeniable erosion in his image as a leader who understands the economic plight of American families and who is actively working to turn the economy around. These dimensions of leadership had been longstanding strengths for the President and to regain them he must seize the mantle of economic populism and convey a clear plan for achieving broad-based prosperity and a resurgent middle class. Currently, Republicans in Congress have an 8 point advantage over Obama on turning the economy around (49% GOP in Congress, 41% Obama). The gap is slightly wider when voters are asked who is better prepared to create jobs: 51% choose the GOP in Congress compared to 40% who choose President Obama. Independents also choose the Republicans in Congress on creating jobs by an 11-point margin, though their margin on "turning the economy around" is just 7 points. Noticeably, President Obama is weaker on these dimensions than the Democrats in Congress are—a striking reversal from past patterns where Obama had generally out-performed his Congressional counterparts. This disparity is especially pronounced among college-educated men, voters 30-44, married voters, union households, and voters in the South, Mountain States, and Central Plains; all of these groups give more credit to the Democrats in Congress than the President on key economic issues. As the President hits the campaign trail to make the case for Democrats across the country, he must not only shine a light on the destructive record and agenda of the opposition, he must also offer the voters a clear plan for turning the economy around and putting Americans back to work. He needs to communicate an economic narrative, show where he will take the country economically, and build economic security for our families.

Looking to 2012, most of those in the potential Republican field are either completely unknown (such as Tim Pawlenty, Haley Barbour, Mitch Daniels, and John Thune, all of whom are unfamiliar to at least three-in-five likely voters) or come with serious baggage (such as Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich). President Obama wins both 2012 trial heats tested, besting Palin by an 8-point margin, 50% to 42% (47% to 40% among independents), and Daniels by a 6-point margin, 47% to 41% (44% to 34% among independents). While we shouldn't read too much into Presidential trial heats when the first Republican caucus is more than 14 months away, Obama's strength against the Republican Party's most prominent figure is encouraging.

Palin indeed faces serious liabilities should she decide to mount a campaign for President. Voters have an unfavorable impression of her personally (44% favorable, 49% unfavorable), which is also the case among women (38%, 54%) and independents

(42%, 45%). Not only that, they are also extremely critical of her decision to quit as Governor of Alaska in 2009. By nearly a two-to-one margin, voters say this decision makes them less likely to support her should she run in 2012 (30% more likely, 58% less likely, 12% no difference/don't know). A majority of independents expresses the same sentiment (27% more likely, 54% less likely).

Democrats have multiple obstacles to overcome over the next thirty-plus days, including mobilization of the base, shoring up of the woman's vote, and solidifying their economic bona fides. But ultimately, this data shows that the wind at Republicans' backs is more of a breeze than a gale. Their lead on the generic Congressional ballot is within the margin of error, they narrowly trail Democrats on the major issue of this election (the economy), and the leaders of their Party are unpopular reminders of the not-so-distant days of Republican governance. In short, they are failing to close the deal with an electorate still leery of returning them to power. Even if conventional wisdom has conceded this election to the Republicans, the Democrats should not, as there is still much terrain to be fought over—and won—between now and Election Day.