



Democratic poll analysis: Republicans lack momentum
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Our most recent POLITICO/GW Battleground Poll shows a generic Congressional ballot unchanged from late September, with Republicans lacking the momentum they had hoped to generate over the course of the last month. This, despite the advantages of a highly engaged base, a change-oriented electorate (64% say we are on the wrong track), and a public image that is moderately net-positive (+7 favorable); these are all advantages that Democrats cannot currently claim. And yet, voters remain divided on which Party would be better at creating jobs, turning the economy around, handling Social Security, and nearly every other dimension tested. In addition, while many voters have already forgotten the disastrous consequences of Republican governance a short time ago, they cannot volunteer a specific set of GOP solutions for the future. This suggests an opening in the last 10 days for Democrats to provide real definition to women and independent voters on what the future would look like—for American workers and for the country as a whole—with a resurgent Republican Party in Washington. The key to winning this election is for Democrats to clearly distinguish their economic and jobs agenda from the Republicans' agenda.

Republicans retain the same 5-point lead they held in September: 47% to 42%, with 11% of voters still undecided. While the window for persuasion efforts has not yet closed, already much of the focus has turned to base mobilization. Democrats badly need to ensure their loyalists show up on Election Day, as they continue to face an enthusiasm gap. Both Parties are bringing their own partisans home, with 86% of Democrats and 90% of Republicans supporting their respective candidates, but Republicans remain considerably more enthusiastic about voting on Election Day (73% are extremely likely to vote, up from 69%) than Democrats (63%, up from 56%). Democratic subgroups continue to register on the lower-end of the enthusiasm spectrum, including 18-29 year-olds (52% extremely likely), African-Americans (47%), Latinos (60%), and unmarried women (62%). Engaging this coalition of voters, who were so instrumental to Democratic victories in 2008, is essential.

In fact, independents (67% extremely likely), who are currently supporting the Republican candidate by 14-points in the generic trial heat, remain more engaged than Democrats. With a quarter of independents undecided (26%), their vote—and the outcome of the election—remains up for grabs. And while independents have gravitated toward the Republicans since our last poll (44% to 30%, compared to 38% to 32% in September), they continue to favor Democrats over Republicans when it comes to the central issue of job creation (+6); reminding them of the massive destruction of American jobs under GOP control could help reverse the trend.

In many ways, this election is up to women voters. A strong gender gap persists, though Democrats are not engaging enough of an advantage among women to offset the GOP's strength among men. Women prefer the generic Democrat by just 3 points (46% to 43%), while men choose a Republican by 15 points (52% to 37%). Attempts to pull out close races in tough districts will almost certainly require bringing women back into the fold—in particular, independent women living in the suburbs. Independent women are supporting the Republican by 14 points (43% to 29%) while independent men are supporting the Republican by 15 points (45% to 30%). At the same time, Democrats cannot continue to cede men to such a dramatic degree, in particular non-college educated men, who have gone from supporting the GOP by 6 points in September to 15 points now—despite a 9-point preference for the Democrats when it comes to creating jobs.

The usual age dynamics remain at play, with Democrats winning the youngest voters (age 18-34) by 19-points, and Republicans leading moderately among voters 35-44 (48% GOP, 40% Dem), 45-64 (47% GOP, 40% Dem), and more convincingly among seniors (54% GOP, 37% Dem). Compared to the September data, this represents greater polarization at both ends of the age spectrum, as well as some attrition among voters 35-44, who were evenly split one month ago. The downward shift in the vote among 35-44 year olds notwithstanding, these voters actually prefer the Democrats narrowly when it comes to job creation (+2); this is yet another indicator that Democrats must engage this issue more viscerally in order to turn around their fortunes.

While Republicans have an advantage in overall enthusiasm and a lead on the generic Congressional ballot, voters are still far from embracing their agenda. One of the more interesting findings revealed in this data is that Republicans are ahead not because of their issue strengths, but in spite of their weaknesses on the issues. On five of the six dimensions tested, voters are within the margin of error on which Party in Congress would do a better job. Specifically, voters split on which Party would be better at turning the economy around (+1 GOP), creating jobs (even), sharing the electorate's values (+2 GOP), handling health care (+1 Dem), and handling Social Security (+4 GOP). The only significant advantage for either Party comes on controlling the deficit (+14 GOP), which of course the Republicans have repeatedly exploded each time they have been in power. Encouragingly, voters who are undecided on the Congressional trial heat afford the Democrats advantages on turning the economy around (+6 Dem), creating jobs (+7 Dem), and handling Social Security (+15 Dem); independents also give the Democrats leads on creating jobs (+6 Dem) and handling Social Security (+3). In the remaining days, Democrats must convert these advantages into ballot support.

As we approach our third consecutive change election, majorities of voters are unhappy with the direction of the country (64% wrong track). Beyond their general dissatisfaction, they are notably negative on two signature pieces of Democrats' policy agenda over the past two years: they do not believe the economic recovery legislation is

working (38% agree, 57% disagree), and they are critical of the health care reform law (44% favorable, 53% unfavorable). Ultimately, of course, all elections are about the future, but Democrats have so far failed to deliver on two (related) fronts. First, they have failed in assigning culpability to the Republicans for their massive economic failures and their decision to continue in the wrong direction on the economy; and second, they have not yet offered Americans a vision for the future that is appreciably different from what voters have seen for their families over the past two years. It is telling that voters are currently more worried about two more years of Obama and the Congressional Democrats than they are about Republicans taking control of Congress and returning to their policies of the past under the Bush administration (48% to 43%). Among independents, this gap is even more pronounced (46% to 35%).

At this point, Democrats have days and hours—not weeks—to communicate forcefully, clearly, and in unison the destruction caused to the country under Republican governance, the (new) steps being take to mitigate the damage, and most important, who stands to gain—and lose—from a resurgent Republican Party in Washington. They need to show that their economic policies will help families at their kitchen tables, instead of just helping banks and Wall Street. This economic contrast is critical among independent women, who favor the Republicans over the President by 15 points on who will create jobs, but favor the Democrats in Congress by 16 points over the Republicans on the same dimension. Simply put, the Democrats must communicate.

Underscoring the central role that emotion is playing in the public's decision making process at this point, voters acknowledge that the Republican agenda is more sizzle than steak. They believe that the Democrats have proposed more specific policies and solutions for the nation's problems than the Republicans (42% Democrats, 39% Republicans); this is true for independents (+8 Democrats) and undecided voters (+6 Democrats) as well. Consequently, the Republicans are benefiting from a cynical ploy—abetted by many in the media—to delivering full-throated criticisms of the Democrats without offering any concrete solutions of their own. Voters also say the Republicans are considerably more likely to have engaged in negative campaigning (39% Congressional Republicans, 28% Congressional Democrats), though they clearly do not appear to be paying a price for it.

Absent a real reform agenda to offer, Republicans running for everything from U.S. Senate down to community dogcatcher have spent much of their ammunition attacking President Obama, and it has taken a toll on the President's image. Voters remain mixed on the President, though for the first time, we are seeing their personal and professional assessments of Obama begin to align—a dangerous sign for the administration. Voters are now net unfavorable toward the President on a personal level (46% have a favorable opinion, 50% unfavorable, compared to 54% / 45% in our previous poll), with numbers strikingly similar to their ratings of his job performance (46% approve, 51% disapprove, identical to our last poll). Among the key swing

independents, the President's favorability rating is 38% / 53%, while his job approval rating is 38% / 56% — a dangerous convergence.

Moreover, on the issues front, President Obama does not enjoy the same competitiveness with the Republicans in Congress as do the Democrats in Congress. While voters are split on whether the President or the Republicans in Congress are more likely to share the electorate's values (44% GOP in Congress, 43% Obama), Obama loses on every other dimension and is outside of the margin of error, including on turning the economy around (-6), handling health care (-7), handling Social Security (-8), creating jobs (-11), and controlling the deficit (-16). Currently, President Obama trails a generic Republican by 6-points in a 2012 trial heat, though the Republican Party would probably prefer to nominate a generic Republican than most of their actual contenders, who do not match up particularly well against Obama and carry their own significant baggage.

In just over a week, the speculation will be over and we will finally know the extent of the damage to the Democratic majority, which Party will control Congress, and whether Republican Primary voters' strategy of nominating far-right Tea Party candidates over more moderate Republicans will have helped or hurt their cause. While Republicans hold a small lead in the generic Congressional trial heat, a narrow swath of the electorate is still making up its mind. In addition, the GOP's inability to gather momentum over the course of the past month suggests that the landslide they are hoping for may go the way of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction—or so many budget surpluses. No matter the outcome, Republicans will soon have to face the reality that voters have not embraced their agenda, nor are many even aware of their agenda. In the last week, Democrats will need to fill in that lack of definition and provide a clear picture of the future on the economy for American families and American workers under Republican control. If Democrats are able to turn the remaining undecided voters, engage their most loyal constituencies, and play out their advantages on jobs and retirement security, they may make this a disappointing Election Day for Republican candidates and pundits alike. If not, we may once again prove right Gore Vidal's ever-prophetic statement that we are truly "the United States of Amnesia."