

The Battleground: Democratic Perspective

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Democratic Strategic Analysis:

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With the 2014 elections just over two months away, the midterm election remains very competitive. In this most recent Battleground poll, the Republicans have regained a narrow lead they had surrendered in the spring in the generic vote for Congress: 46% Republican, 42% Democrat, with 14% of voters undecided. The fluidity of this measure underscores the volatility of the political environment heading into November. Beyond just their deficit in the generic trial heat, Democrats face some key challenges as they enter the fall campaign, not the least of which is a relative lack of enthusiasm and interest in the elections. At the same time, however, Democrats enjoy leads among a number of electoral constituencies that are on the rise (e.g., women, younger voters, and voters of color), as well as important advantages on issues and dimensions of leadership central to the economic debate, including Social Security and Medicare, and more broadly representing and standing up for America's middle class. Despite a frenetic and varied issue environment over the past several months, and a strong appetite among voters for change at the national level, Democrats remain very competitively positioned. Moreover, Republicans have not convinced the electorate that the proper prescription for the country is to swell the GOP's ranks in Congress. A slim majority (51%) may disapprove of the President's job performance, but that number includes nearly one-in-six liberals, whose dissatisfaction will never translate into votes for the GOP; moreover, a whopping 80% of voters disapprove of the Republican-controlled Congress. Neither side has convincingly seized control of the electoral narrative for the 2014 elections. However, given voters' continuing focus on the economy, and Democrats' advantages on key aspects of that debate, the component pieces for Democratic wins in November lie at the ready; Democrats must first demonstrate to the electorate in vivid terms, bold policy initiatives, and incisive contrasts with Republicans that they are prepared to act decisively to rebuild the middle class and the economy along with it, creating conditions where working and middle class Americans can share in the fruits of a functioning economy—advancing their economic positions and ensuring a more prosperous existence for their children—rather than continuing to allow an extraordinarily well-connected and well-heeled corporate elite to pick the economy clean.

The Political Context

It is a longstanding and unavoidable reality that voters remain frustrated and discouraged with the direction in which the country is headed, and eager for change. Seven-in-ten (70%) voters think the country is on the wrong track, up from 64% in March (21% right direction). Democrats are more optimistic, though not overwhelmingly so (38% right direction/47% wrong track), and Republicans are near unanimous in their displeasure (5%/92%). Just 21% of independents say the country is headed in the right direction, while 70% say we are headed off on the wrong track.

The most important issue driving this election cycle is the economy. Most Americans have not extricated themselves from the recession; they are still hurting and worried about their future for

themselves, for their families, and for the country. A 24% plurality of voters cites “the economy” as the top issue influencing their vote for Congress this fall. Partisans of all stripes point to the economy as a leading issue, but independents (26%) are particularly focused on this issue. Men, voters age 35-44, African Americans, and Latino voters are especially likely to say the economy is their top priority. Another 10% of voters say that Social Security and Medicare will be the chief issues informing their vote in the fall. The “behavior of your Member of Congress” (15%) is next on voters’ priority list and is especially important to voters age 18-34, Democrats, and independents, though this issue is of little importance to Republicans. While “Obamacare” (13%) and “feelings toward the President” (10% overall) round out the issue agenda overall, Republicans are much more influenced by those matters than the electorate as a whole (19% and 17%, respectively, among Republicans).

Given voters' persistent frustration about the state of the economy, it is not surprising that only three-in-ten voters (29%) believe that their own personal financial situation has gotten better over the past 4 years, while more than two-thirds believe their financial situation has either gotten worse (36%) or stayed the same (35%). Republicans lead partisan discontent, with a 54% majority saying things have gotten worse, compared to 37% of independents and only 17% of Democrats. Democrats, on the other hand, are feeling more sanguine about their economic situations (44% gotten better). For those voters whose personal economic situations have either leveled off or declined, the economic issue they are most concerned about is “having enough money to pay your bills and the rising cost of daily goods” (39% and 34%, respectively), followed by fears about “retirement” (16%), and “health care costs” (10% and 12%, respectively). For Democratic candidates to win this fall, mere critique of the economy will not be enough to win; sitting members of Congress will need to be specific in describing how their districts have benefited from their specific actions on jobs, but in the face of continued dissatisfaction and growing frustration, incumbents and challengers alike must offer a prospective, populist economic agenda as well.

Perceptions of the President and Congress

While perceptions of Obama remain lukewarm, dissatisfaction toward the President cannot hold a candle to the public’s palpable disdain for Congress. Currently the President earns a 51% negative job rating, which is slightly better than perceptions of him from last March (54%). Republicans are leading the charge against the President (89% disapprove), independents track the overall mean (53% disapprove), and Democrats find much to praise in the President’s performance (82% approve). A majority of 18-34 year olds approves of the President’s job performance. Unfortunately, all other age cohorts are more critical (55% disapprove among voters 45-64, 53% among 35-44, and 52% among seniors). Perceptions of the President do not get any better when voters are asked to rate him on a range of specific issues. Voters are most disappointed with the President when it comes to his handling of spending, his relationship with Congress, foreign policy, and immigration. Voters are mixed, and to some degree acknowledge that the President has had some success when it comes to protecting the middle class and the needs of seniors.

Of course, the President is not on the ballot this year, Congress is. And Congress is the most unpopular entity tested in this study. Seventy-nine percent of voters disapprove of the job Congress is doing, including 65% who strongly disapprove. Independent voters are among the most incensed about

Congress (83% disapprove), followed closely by Democrats (82%). Even 75% of Republicans disapprove of Congress.

Moreover, on major dimensions of the economic debate, Democrats have an advantage over Republicans. Democrats should seek to exploit their strengths on “standing up for the middle class” (+14 Dem), “representing middle class values” (+12 Dem), “Medicare” (+11 Dem), and “Social Security” (+6 Dem). Democrats’ leads on “Social Security” and “Medicare” among seniors are impressive (+11 Dem for both issues), particularly so considering that Democrats trailed Republicans on the issue of Social Security by 9 points at the end of 2010 (Medicare was not tested in that survey). Similarly remarkable is Democrats’ lead on “standing up for the middle class” among independents (+17 Dem). Republicans in Congress, for their part, will look to tout their perceived advantages on “the federal budget and spending” (+13 advantage for the GOP), “foreign policy” (+10 GOP), and to a lesser extent “the economy” (+7 GOP), “immigration” (+7 GOP), and “taxes” (+6 GOP). Democrats have closed the gap on taxes to the lowest it has been in decades, underscoring the competitiveness that Democrats have derived from engaging the populist economic debate. Notably, voters are divided on which Party is better equipped to deal with “jobs” (+1 GOP) and “solving problems” (+1 GOP). Among independents, the Republican advantages on “solving problems” and “jobs” are similarly negligible (+4 and +1, respectively). Over the next two months, Democrats must improve their standing on “jobs.” Democrats have never won a national election when they have not been ahead on jobs.

Contours of the Congressional Ballot

The generic Congressional trial heat is tightly matched. With fewer than two months remaining in the election season, 46% of voters would vote for the Republican today, 42% choose a Democrat, and 13% are undecided; this is slightly changed since April, when Democrats and Republicans were tied at 43%. At first blush, the internal patterns look familiar to what we have seen in recent competitive elections. The gender gap is alive and well, if slightly less pronounced at this stage, with women supporting the Democrat (46% Dem to 40% GOP) and men supporting the Republican (52% GOP to 37% Dem). This represents some slippage in the Democrats’ advantage among women (March 2014 D+10, now D+6), while Republicans have expanded their advantage among men (March 2013 R+12, now R+15). Democrats need to reverse this trend in order to have a chance to retake control of Congress. Women are the key to winning this election and they currently make up 59% of all undecided voters. Democrats must broaden their support among women in these last two months of the campaign to have a chance to win.

The youngest voters (under 35) are the most supportive of Democrats but we are seeing an erosion from the historic levels of support in 2008 and 2012. However, middle age voters have moved in the opposite direction. In March, middle age voters split their generic candidate support with voters 35-44 giving the Democrat a slight edge and voters 45-64 giving the Republican the edge. Both cohorts are now more supportive of the Republican (49% GOP, 40% Dem among voters 35-44; 47% GOP, 39% Dem among voters 45-64). In positive news for Democrats, after affording the GOP wide margins in recent elections, older voters are now firmly a battleground (Republicans lead by 1 among over 65 and older).

White voters are still solidly behind the Republican candidate (55% GOP to 34% Dem), while African American voters (81% Dem to 6% GOP) and Latino voters (56% Dem to 28% GOP) lean solidly Democratic.

Both sides are bringing their partisan bases home in nearly equal measure; 87% of Democrats choose the Democrat while 90% of Republicans choose the Republican. Independent voters are still not giving either party majority support yet, though they are leaning toward the Republicans at this point (41% GOP, 26% Dem. 33% undecided). 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. 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.

Turnout will be the biggest issue for Democratic campaigns, as they head into GOTV season. Among those who are extremely likely to vote, the Republican candidate has a 12-point lead (51% GOP to 39% Dem); those who just say they are "very likely" (44% Dem to 42% GOP) or "somewhat likely" (53% Dem to 31% 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, fully 69% of Republicans are extremely likely to vote compared to 57% of Democrats, and that number falls to 49% among 18-29 year olds and 48% among single women.

This study relies on a tight turnout model; the warning here for Democrats is that typical levels of turnout among the base will not be enough this fall. Democrats will also need to work harder to pull independents over to their side; currently one-in-four (26%) independents choose the Democrat on the generic ballot, while 41% choose the Republican and 33% 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. In addition, for Democrats to make any gains in November, they must increase their advantage among women. Democratic candidates can do this by emphasizing a broad range of women's issues—including the economy, reproductive health care, and Social Security and Medicare—and weaving these issues into existing advantages among women on such key dimensions as "standing up for the middle class" (+14 Dem overall, +20 Dem among women) and "representing middle class values" (+12 Dem overall, +15 Dem among women).

While Election Day draws ever closer, the political landscape continues to shift, and so even at this late date, the outcomes of the elections are very much up for grabs. Despite disadvantages due to the sheer number of seats Democrats must defend in the Senate, Democrats still have the ammunition they need to stave off a united Republican Congress. These Democrats are uniquely positioned to offer the economic solutions that voters want—and define the stakes of this election in terms voters are already coming to understand on their own. Furthermore, the GOP's internecine conflicts and sagging, confused brand continues to cast doubt on their candidates' prospects this year and into the future.