



2012: A Nomination Worth Having

By Ed Goetas

The latest edition of the POLITICO/George Washington University Battleground Poll finds a political environment heavily tilted against Democrats, driven by an electorate in which nearly two-thirds (63%) believe the country is going in the wrong direction (54% strongly), and a majority (52%) disapproves of the President (45% Strongly). As much as President Obama would like to blame all his problems on the last President, voters are increasingly moving from a focus on the problems of the past, to a focus on the failed solutions of the Obama Administration today.

After a short-lived post Labor Day surge of Democratic voter support, Republicans now hold a five-point lead on the generic Congressional ballot. In addition, Republicans hold advantages over the Democrats on vote intensity (+13), and on interest in the election (+15), both indicators of higher voter participation and running over double the advantage seen by Republican voters in the 1994 election. The net effect of this Republican voter intensity means that any numbers in the top-line data only gets that much better for Republicans in a projected vote model. For example, on the generic ballot where Republicans lead by five-points, on the vote model that lead moves to ten-points (51%-41%).

It is also interesting to note that the Tea Party movement, which has been portrayed by the national Democrat pundits, as a yoke around the necks of Republicans, is nothing short of wishful thinking. The much-discussed Tea Party movement actually has a net positive image (43% favorable to 35% unfavorable) with likely voters. The Tea Party movement has a favorable image with a majority of Republicans (73%), with a plurality of Independents (44%), and with almost one-quarter (23%) of conservative Democrats.

One of the biggest challenges for Republicans over the final weeks of this election season will be to avoid overconfidence. And, if Republicans do take control of Congress, they will face an electorate expecting changes – an expectation that will only be that much greater if Republicans win control of both legislative bodies. In fact, a majority (53%) of voters already believe that Republicans will be able to repeal Obama-era laws if they take control of Congress.

However, in any policy debate with President Obama, Congressional Republicans will have the benefit of having a strong issue handling advantage and trust of the American people over President Obama on both turning the economy around (49%-41%) and on jobs (51%-40%). This eight-point advantage on the economy and eleven-point advantage on job creation is substantial, when compared to the slight edge congressional democrats



have over Republicans (the economy +2 and jobs +1). The other factor that will increasingly come into play with future debates about the future of the country, is that voters have increasingly come to the conclusion that the President is far more liberal than mainstream America. Sixty-six percent (66%) of voters now believe that the President is liberal, with forty-two percent (42%) believing he is very liberal.

All this to say that the Republican nomination for President in 2012 may be worth something! Unlike past mid-term election cycles, Republican candidates have been remarkably restrained in their angling for position for the upcoming Presidential primary season. Indeed, this poll finds that with the exception of past candidates or prominent national leaders, the field of GOP candidates is largely unknown. No potential candidate other than Romney, Palin, Huckabee, or Gingrich has a favorable or unfavorable rating that exceeds fifteen percent. Among the best-known candidates, only Sarah Palin has a net negative image -- 44% favorable to 49% unfavorable. The lack of definition to this field offers a strong opportunity for a potential GOP candidate who is relatively unknown now to emerge as a major contender for this nomination.

This nomination is certainly worth having as Barack Obama has many of the traditional signs for an endangered incumbent. A majority of voters, including a majority of Independents (53%) and twenty-four percent (24%) of conservative Democrats, disapprove of his job performance. On the soft re-election ballot, a majority of voters (57%) say they will either vote to replace Obama (44%) or will consider voting for someone else (13%). Only thirty-eight percent (38%) of voter responded that President Obama deserves reelection. In a match-up against the potential Republican candidate with the highest unfavorable rating (Palin), Obama achieves just fifty percent (50%) support. In a match-up against a potential Republican candidate with a low awareness amongst voters (Daniels), Obama receives just forty-seven percent (47%) support while Daniels receives support (41%) that exceeds his favorable rating by a five-to-one margin. Even in this early stage, more than one-third (35%) of the electorate and seventy percent (70%) of Republicans select the GOP candidate on both of these ballots.

In his preparations for the 2012 elections, Obama is clearly planning to replicate the Clinton 1996 re-election model of using a Republican controlled Congress and a vocal Democratic minority as his foils to portray him as the sensible middle of the road choice. However, the Republicans in Congress currently hold the upper hand on the critical issued of the economy and jobs. In addition, he will face significant challenges re-branding himself as a consensus-building centrist as almost two-thirds of voters (66%) view Obama as a liberal, including more than two-in-five voters (42%) who view Obama as very liberal. As he faces an electorate in which more than six-in-ten (63%) voters identify themselves as conservative, including one-quarter (25%) who indentify themselves as very conservatives, Obama will face serious challenges convincing voters



that he shares their values and should continue to be their national leader.

This 2010 election season will yield significant gains for Republicans fueled by more interested and enthusiastic voters. How much Republicans gain will be determined by their ability to run disciplined campaigns focused on voter dissatisfaction with the present. Voters will be expecting Republicans to serve as strong opponents to the excesses of the past two years and they must be ready to deliver. They will have the support of voters, but they will also need the courage of their convictions to restrain spending and slow the massive growth in federal power that have been the hallmarks of the past two years.

The 2012 election has a wide-open Republican field that is likely to have an impressive number of candidates as potential challengers realize the extent to which President Obama is vulnerable and the difficulty he will have in moving to the center to increase his chances for re-election. This wide-open GOP field should yield a healthy debate about the nomination and offers the opportunity for a relatively unknown candidate to emerge. Republican voters are eager for a strong challenger who can carry a message of proven fiscal conservatism. Every potential Republican Presidential candidate has a record of accomplishment on this issue.

The next few weeks will be fascinating for political observers, but the next two years ought to offer an unprecedented debate about the future not only of the Republican Party, but the future of the country as a whole.