



Republican poll analysis: 2012--The GOP Wave to Continue

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This latest edition of the POLITICO-George Washington University Battleground Poll finds that the political environment continues to be very poor for both President Obama and for Congressional Democrats.

More than seven-in-ten voters believe the country is on the wrong track, including a majority of voters who strongly believe this. Of additional concern to national Democrats should be the overwhelming focus that voters have on pocketbook issues. Fully 73% of voters select a pocketbook issue as their top issue concern. In addition, a majority (57%) of voters indicate that they are extremely or very worried about the country suffering another economic downturn. These pessimistic and economically anxious voters will be open to persuasion from Republican candidates.

The 2012 Presidential race will be no exception to having many voters open to considering the Republican candidate. President Obama will face an electorate in which more than two-in-five voters (43%) have already decided that they will definitely not be voting for him. In addition, while his overall job approval rating is mixed (45% approve/50% disapprove) and his personal approval rating remains outstanding (73% approve); the President receives a much more critical reception on the pocketbook issues that are the top concerns of voters. On the economy, the President has a majority disapproval rating (58%) and those who disapprove strongly (45%) outnumber those who approve strongly (11%) by more than four-to-one. For the federal budget and spending, the President has a disapproval rating of 62% and there is again a four-to-one intensity gap with those strongly disapproving at 48% and those strongly approving at 12%. On the issue of jobs, the President again has a majority disapproval rating (57%) and the intensity gap between strongly approve (12%) and strongly disapprove (40%) stands at more than three-to-one.

The President will also be facing the additional tactical challenge that a majority (53%) of voters want him to continue to compromise with Congress while a significant portion of his base wants him to employ a more aggressive style. Those who want the President to employ a more aggressive style include strong majorities of Democrats (62%), liberals (60%), and his definite supporters (61%). However, majorities of key voting blocs like Independents (51%), seniors (56%), and college graduates (57%) want the President to continue to make deals with Congress. On this crucial leadership tactic, the President can do what the majority of voters want and what majorities of key 2012 voting blocs want or what his most ardent supporter want, but he cannot do both.



Of particular importance for this week, one of the key proposals floated for jobs creation, a federally subsidized infrastructure construction project, enjoys bare majority support during the time when these proposals are usually at their highest level of support. Given the tepid response to this proposal and the overall dissatisfaction that voters have with the performance of the President on the issues of jobs, whatever measures the President proposes in his speech on Thursday are dead on arrival.

The fortunes of Congressional Democrats are similarly bleak. The generic Congressional ballot is a statistical tie with 41% of voters selecting the Democrats and 40% selecting the Republicans. Given the significant advantage the Democrats enjoy in majority minority districts, this tie in reality represents a notable lead for the GOP.

In addition, despite the many efforts by the White House and their allies to demonize Republican Congressional leaders, the GOP Congressional leaders actually enjoy a slight advantage over their Democratic counterparts. In this political environment, no Congressional leader has a sterling image rating. However, John Boehner has a significantly lower unfavorable rating (30%) than Nancy Pelosi (52% unfavorable). In the same way, Mitch McConnell has a notably lower unfavorable rating (21%) than Harry Reid (36% unfavorable). A key component of Congressional races is often attempting to make voters fearful about the extreme views of the leaders of the opposing party. In this case, it will be much easier for Republicans to make this case about Pelosi and Reid than it will be for Democrats to make this case about Boehner and McConnell.

The other consistent punching bag for the White House and Congressional Democrats – the Tea Party movement – emerged largely unscathed from the debate ceiling debate, despite being described in vile terms by Vice President Biden and others. Asked to describe the impact the recent debt ceiling debate had on their view of the Tea Party movement, a strong majority of voters (63%) say this debate had no impact (44%) or improved (19%) their view of the Tea Party movement.

Like their President, Congressional Democrats will face significant challenges in making their case with voters on the economic issues that are likely to be critical to voters. In an issue handling series, Congressional Republicans enjoy advantages over Congressional Democrats on the issues of “turning the economy around” (+5%), “creating jobs” (+2%), and “controlling the deficit” (+22%). On the issues that matter the most to most voters, Congressional Republicans are winning the argument.

Turning to the Republican Presidential primary, it should be noted at the outset that national polling data at this stage of the race is largely a measure of name identification and media coverage. One needs only to recall the national polling successes of figures like Colin Powell, Fred Thompson, and Rudy



Giuliani to realize that the votes that really matter will not be cast for months and will be cast not nationally but in a handful of states. While some of the candidates tested in this poll are struggling with their name identification or vote availability or both, we should remember two axioms. First, to paraphrase Newt Gingrich, if all most voters know about some of these candidates is the negative media reports about them; even the candidates themselves would find themselves unlikeable. Second, this is the stage of the campaign when these candidates are making their appeals to the most ideologically strident members of the Republican Party. It should be expected that these efforts might serve to alienate some voters. The winner of the GOP nomination will have ample opportunity to improve their image, make their case with all voters, and draw a sharp contrast with Obama on economic issues. This is a timeline that has repeated over decades of Presidential campaign cycles.

In fact, fully 82% of voters indicate they are considering voting or unsure about at least one of the major GOP candidates and a majority (56%) of voters indicate they are considering support or unsure about at least four of the major GOP candidates. In a similar way, despite all the talk about the desire of some elites for additional candidates to enter this race, fully 53% of Republicans indicate that they are satisfied with the current field of Presidential candidates. For a party that is notoriously judgmental about its candidates, this level of satisfaction is extraordinary.

In sum, although the 2012 elections are more than a year away, this poll finds Republicans in a strong position to make significant gains in these elections. Voters need months of good economic news to believe that a recovery has taken place. In a few months, the President and Congressional Democrats will be facing an electorate that will believe the nation remains mired in an economic slump, no matter what economists tell them. This current electorate believes that Congressional Republicans will do superior work on issues like turning the economy around and jobs. These factors combined with the unenviable position the President faces in either alienating his base by continuing to deal with Congress or alienating the majority of voters by taking a more confrontational tone as well as the skepticism his job creating initiatives will face mix together to form a political environment that provides Republicans with excellent opportunities to make gains across the country in 2012, including winning the White House.