The Battleground: Democrats Competitively Positioned for 2014
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Democratic Strategic Analysis:
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With the 2014 elections just over six months away, the midterms remain very tightly matched. In this most recent Battleground poll, Democrats have closed January’s 2-point deficit on the generic congressional ballot, and are now running neck and neck with Republican candidates nationally (43% Republican, 43% Democrat, 14% undecided). This dynamic, among other factors, substantiates the argument that the Democrats are competitively positioned for 2014, despite the gloomy conventional wisdom about the Party’s chances. The Democrats enjoy double-digit advantages on key issues, including standing up for the middle class, representing middle class values, Social Security, and Medicare. Voters also see the Democrats as better when it comes to solving problems and the Party remains competitive on jobs, the economy, and even taxes. The data also reinforce the notion that congressional Democrats are making progress shifting out of a defensive posture on health care, both as the White House goes on an aggressive—and so far successful—full court press to encourage new sign-ups, and as Americans increasingly come to see through the Obamacare spin and understand the benefits of the new law. Moreover, we see in this study evidence that Democrats’ efforts to define the elections around populist economic issues—raising the minimum wage, ensuring equal pay for working women, and strengthening the safety net of Social Security and Medicare—are finding traction among the 2014 electorate.

As we noted in January, voters remain fairly united not only in their disdain for Congress but also in their keen desire for Washington to act decisively on policies that will generate economic growth. Specifically, we see a budding recognition among voters that access to quality jobs and broadly shared economic opportunity must be a central part of the solution. Voters increasingly feel worn down in their attempts to get ahead economically and are deeply pessimistic about the future for younger Americans. They put their faith largely in Democrats to stand up for the middle class and create a culture of fair play, in which working and middle class families can advance their economic fortunes and ensure a more prosperous existence for the next generation.

Democrats and Republicans each face distinct challenges in this election. Turnout will be a major test for the Democrats. Fully 64% of Republicans are extremely likely to vote compared to 57% of Democrats, and that number falls to 36% among 18-29 year olds and 38% among single women. On the other hand, Republicans have serious divisions within their ranks that threaten their ability to rally the base. While 68% of Democrats are happy with the direction of their Party, just 33% of Republicans are happy with the direction of their Party.

The Fairness Frame

Despite gradual but continuous economic growth, voters are not yet ready to shed their deep-seated anxieties over the state of the national economy and their own their financial well-being. Although the enduring American belief that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough still prevails among many
voters on a theoretical level (65% agree, 34% disagree), faith in this central tenet of the American Dream is notably weak (only 38% strongly agree with that statement). And equally prevalent is the belief that the rules are stacked against them in today’s America, making it difficult (or impossible) to get ahead. To that end, a 54% majority say it is no longer sufficient to work hard and play by the rules, and that those who do never get ahead; just 45% of voters disagree with that sentiment. Even stronger are perceptions that this country’s economic rules favor the rich (64% agree, 34% disagree), and a resounding majority believes the middle class has it the toughest in America (72% agree, 25% disagree). This basic economic framework, which pundits from Wall St. to Washington routinely decry as “class warfare” and “the politics of envy”, has taken hold as the central narrative for understanding our economy by every major and minor subgroup in the data, with the exception of Republicans (though even 41% of GOPers believe that economic rules favor the rich).

Voters are extremely skeptical about their ability to attain the American Dream and overwhelmingly agree that the next generation will be worse off than they are (76% to 20%). This bleak perspective is shared by solid majorities of voters regardless of their age, including 75% of seniors, 80% of voters 45-64, 80% of 30-44 year olds, and even 59% of voters under 30.

This mixture of fear and consternation is not particularly new, but its growing persistence is making the electorate increasingly ornery. The Battleground data reveal a compelling desire for the government to act in order to reduce the gap between the rich and everyone else (59% agree, 41% strongly; 38% disagree), a direct rebuttal to Republican claims that the American people are not looking for solutions that create a different kind of economy. This call to action is voiced by 59% of independents, 84% of Democrats, and even 32% of Republicans.

In fact, we find striking consensus around the desire—the need—for government to intervene on grounds of economic fairness. Women (+31 agree) and men (+9 agree) want intervention. Every age cohort in this data wants intervention, ranging from voters under 30 (+25) to seniors (+5). The same is true for whites (+11), moderates (+53), independents (+23), and by a whopping 26-point margin those voters who are undecided in the congressional contests. To say this is not a consensus position would be to ignore bold data to the contrary.

This set of circumstances is nurturing a mood and set of issues that naturally favor the Democrats, though it is fair to say that the Party has not yet pressed its advantage in a unified manner. Not only do voters believe that Democrats are the Party more likely to stand up for the middle class (54% Democrats, 36% Republicans), but by similar margins that Democrats more closely represent middle class values (52% Democrats, 39% Republicans). This is no coincidence, of course—we have long found a Democratic advantage on the middle class. But neither are these casual advantages, and they may represent an intensifying effect as congressional Democrats (and the President) make the case for policies that would reduce the gap between the rich and everyone else: raising the minimum wage, investing in basic infrastructure projects designed to put Americans back to work, making college and job training more affordable for America’s youth, putting an end to corporate welfare, and requiring the very wealthy to pay their fair share in taxes. The Democrats must pivot from rebutting attacks on the Affordable Care Act to an agenda of bold economic action; the American public’s mood and issue agenda both lend themselves to a debate over the latter.
The Congressional Trial Heat and Views of the Parties

The last two months have ushered in a number of encouraging signs for Democrats. The modest 2-point improvement in the generic congressional ballot obscures more dramatic movement underneath. Moderates have swung toward Democratic candidates in a big way, supporting them over Republicans by more than a two-to-one margin (46% Democrats, 21% Republicans, and 34% undecided). Independents are now closely split in their support: 31% backing the GOP, 29% the Democrats, with a formidable 40% of independents undecided. Seniors, who supported Republicans by seven points in January, now divide their loyalties between Democrats (43%) and Republicans (46%). The gender gap is alive and well, with women supporting the Democrats by a 10-point margin and men the Republicans by a similarly impressive 12-point margin. The marital gap is enormous: married men are voting Republican by a 22-point margin, while married women split (R+1). Single women are voting Democratic by a whopping 36-point margin, and single men by 13 points.

Furthermore, Republican infighting has left the Party with the same brand identity problems that ultimately choked Mitt Romney in 2012, a trend that could continue to hamper their growth in key 2014 Senate contests and will prove especially problematic in 2016. While it is hardly surprising that the key members of the Rising American Electorate, including African Americans (D+79), Latinos (D+28), single voters (D+25), and young voters (D+13) favor Democratic candidates by wide margins, this dynamic underscores just how stymied the Republican Party’s efforts to recast itself have been. A key question in this non-presidential election year, of course, is whether the groups that comprise Rising American Electorate will come out to vote with the same intensity as the Republican base. Republicans currently express more interest in the election (64% extremely likely to vote) than Democrats or independents (57% each), though this is not an uncommon dynamic at this relatively early stage. And more important, given the growing prominence and political significance of the Rising American Electorate, is the GOP’s inability—and seeming unwillingness—to make inroads among those voters.

Not only that, one of the GOP’s most popular and promising standard bearers has sustained extensive damage in the wake of scandal and investigation within his administration. The Battleground poll is just the latest national survey to reveal the impact on Chris Christie’s 2016 prospects, as his now net-negative profile can attest (34% view him favorably, while 40% have an unfavorable impression). Jeb Bush (36% favorable, 40% unfavorable) is also mired in very mixed personal ratings as a result of the deeply embedded Bush hangover in this country, leaving Rand Paul as the only Republican contender tested with favorability ratings that are not underwater (38% favorable, 31% unfavorable) before campaigning even begins in earnest. Conversely, Hillary Clinton demonstrates a remarkable ability to stand out above the partisan political fray, boasting a robust 54% favorable / 42% unfavorable spread—the highest of any political leader tested.

Democrats should also capitalize on several important strengths as they prepare their candidates for November. Voters put their confidence in Democrats over Republicans on key issue dimensions, including standing up for the middle class (D+18), Medicare (D+14), representing middle class values (D+13), and Social Security (D+10). Voters who are undecided in the congressional race follow similar patterns. That the voters trust Democrats to protect Social Security and Medicare is no small token given the advanced age of the electorate in a midterm year; voters 60 and over afford Democrats a 7-point advantage on Social Security and Medicare. And it would be easy to overlook Democrats’ advantage on solving problems (D+8) were it not for Congressional Republicans’ decision to double-
down on their strategy of reckless brinksmanship and inaction on the issues important to the American people. Still, Democrats will need to work to press these advantages in the face of a zealous opposition. Democrats are competitive on the budget and spending (R+7), taxes (R+3), and the economy as a whole (R+4). And the two Parties are at parity on the issue of jobs (D+1). To win the fall elections, Democrats must drive home a bold economic policy agenda that allows them to convert their substantial leads on solving problems and standing up for—and representing the values of—the middle class into advantages on jobs and the economy.

The Outlook

While it may be tempting to make sweeping predictions for November, the political landscape continues to shift. Despite structural disadvantages due to the number of seats Democrats must defend in the Senate, Democrats still have the ammunition they need to stave off a united Republican Congress, and 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 continue to cast doubt on their candidates’ prospects this year and into the future.