

**Battleground Analysis:**  
**Even After a Wave Election, Voter Frustration with Government Remains**

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For Republicans, the 2014 Elections were an almost ideal combination of a favorable political environment and a well prepared political structure that could capitalize on these environmental advantages.

From the outset, the 2014 campaign reaffirmed the importance of quality candidates and quality campaigns. A microcosm of the success that the GOP had in recruiting quality candidates and in running quality campaigns could be seen in the U.S. Senate elections where Republicans avoided potentially disastrous primary outcomes in Kentucky, Mississippi, Iowa, and Colorado as well as recruiting quality candidates in Arkansas, Alaska, Louisiana, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

The exit polls show that voters were clearly frustrated with the status quo, pessimistic about the future, and suspicious that the federal government could be trusted to make appropriate changes. In the exit polls, a majority (65%) of voters thought the country was seriously off on the wrong track, and more than three-in-four (78%) voters were worried about the direction of the national economy. A similar number of voters (75%) think the next generation will be worse off or about the same as today. The suspicion about the status quo solving these issues is seen in the majority of voters (54%) who think the government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals and in the more than three quarters (78%) of voters who think the federal government can be trusted to do what is right only some of the time or never.

These anti-status quo attitudes and the multitude of Republican candidates able to run as credible alternatives lead to some impressive successes in this election. Republicans now control 69 of the 98 state legislative bodies and have 31 of the 50 Governors (not only reelecting governors in swing Midwestern states like Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan, but winning the Governor's Mansion in the President's home state of Illinois). In Washington, Republicans also built on their majority, now at 248 Members in the House of Representatives, their highest gain since the 1930s, and took the Majority in the U.S. Senate (54) with a nine seat gain.

While these overall victories are impressive, the successes they had with key demographic groups are equally noteworthy. The "war on women" rhetoric of Democratic candidates failed miserably. Republicans won male voters by sixteen points while losing women by just four points. In fact, Republicans won with married women

(+10%) and with White women (+14%) by double digit margins. Republicans also won majority support from Independents (54%).

In addition, Republican electoral support from those frustrated with the status quo was impressive. As one would expect, Republican candidates received overwhelming support from voters who disapproved of the President's job performance (83%) and from those who thought Obamacare went too far (84%). However, Republicans also received majority support from those with more philosophical concerns like those who thought government was doing too much (77%), those worried about economic conditions (58%), and middle class voters (67%).

In sum, massive "wave" electoral successes require some combination of three elements – a favorable political environment, quality candidates, and a strong national party infrastructure. In 2014, Republicans across the country enjoyed the benefits of the GOP having an abundance of all three of these elements.

Almost as interesting as the actual results of the 2014 Election was the traditional post-election speech of the incumbent President and his analysis of the election results. Most recent incumbent Presidents, especially those whose Party took a drubbing in the off-year elections, use that speech to make clear that they got the message. That was not the case with President Obama. In fact, in his post-election chat President Obama was downright dismissive of the results of the 2014 Elections saying,

**“So, to everyone who voted, I want you to know that I hear you. To the two-thirds of voters who chose not to participate in the process yesterday, I hear you, too.”**

This is a big difference from his 2008 elections analysis telling GOP leaders that:

**“Elections have consequences”**

This latest edition of the George Washington University Poll (conducted December 7-11) including self-identified mid-term voters and non-midterm voters, finds that there is not as much difference as the President hopes between these mid-term voters and their non-midterm voting counterparts.

Again, for Republicans, the 2014 Elections were an almost ideal combination of a favorable political environment and a well prepared political structure that could capitalize on these environmental advantages. The exit polls showed that voters were clearly frustrated with the status quo, pessimistic about the future, and suspicious that the federal government could be trusted to make appropriate changes.

We wanted to see if any of these attitudes had changed after the President decided to adopt a defiant attitude about the midterm election results. However, on all measures of the political environment – job approval of the President, direction of the country, and voter attitudes about the economy – there has been no improvement in the President’s standing or in the political environment. The President still has a majority (50%) of the electorate who disapprove of his job performance. A strong majority of voters (69%) still believe the country is on the wrong track. On the economy, an overwhelming majority (71%) of voters believe that the next generation will not be better off than the current generation.

In addition, this survey finds there continues to be a political environment in which voters are deeply distrustful of Washington and in which voters are increasingly anxious about their own personal safety. This is not an atmosphere that lends itself to the types of interventionist efforts that the President seems eager to pursue. President Obama’s efforts to downplay these electoral results through legislative maneuvering, executive orders, and trying to blame Republicans have all failed. He is in as poor a place politically today as he was on the day after the midterm elections.

While it is true that this survey finds many voters want a government that does more and is better at enforcing a level playing field, unlike what we saw on Election Day, that is driven by a softening of Republicans and a shift of Independents who are putting their hope in the new Republican majority. For example, there has been a nine point growth (21% to 30%) between the exit polls and this survey in Republicans who think the government should be doing more to solve problems. However, two of the key demographic groups for the 2016 campaign – middle class white voters and Independents – still think the government is doing too many things. Fully fifty percent (50%) of middle class white voters and a plurality of Independents (47%) believe that the government is doing too many things.

At the same time, this data makes clear that voters of all types still have limited trust that the government could effectively implement these ambitious goals. These attitudes will present real challenges to leaders on both sides of the aisle on economic issues as well. Voters clearly want an economic climate that is more tranquil and offers more opportunities for upward mobility, but they also think government is not very trustworthy. Leaders will need to rebuild this trust and implement solutions that work.

A strong majority (69%) of voters continue to believe that the country is on the wrong track, including twice as many voters who “strongly” believe this (57%) as overall voters who believe the country is headed in the right direction (21%). This pessimistic attitude is pervasive across the electorate, as even a plurality of liberals (46%) think the country is on the wrong track.

Voters are similarly dissatisfied with President Obama. A majority (50%) of voters disapprove of his job performance, including fifty-three percent (53%) of midterm election voters. In addition, there continues to be real intensity behind this measure with a fourteen point gap between those who strongly disapprove of his performance (46%) and those who strongly approve (32%).

These pessimistic and dissatisfied attitudes among voters are the lens through which we should always be viewing the political environment. Most voters are going to greet news from Washington with skepticism. These attitudes need to be overcome before voters will be ready to consider solutions.

This poll finds that a majority of voters (52%) believe the government should be doing more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people versus forty-three percent (43%) of voters who believe the government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals. However, when voters are offered the specific task of ensuring employment, a plurality of voters (48%) select that the best way the government can accomplish this task is to “get out the way”. Voters want government to intervene, but they fear what the government will do if it wades into the important task of ensuring the economic stability of voters.

There is a similar trend regarding regulations and enforcement. On a simulated debate question, a majority (50%) of voters select that the “fairer and tougher enforcement of regulations” would be preferable to “fewer burdensome government regulations” (43%). However, more than eight-in-ten voters (83%) indicate they never (24%) or only some of the time (59%) trust the government in Washington. Few voters will want to place their economic future in the hands of an entity in which they have so little faith.

This economic anxiety is seen across a variety of measures. On a list of six issues, “the economy” (19%) is chosen most often as the issue driving midterm voters in their Congressional vote, outpacing the next issue, “feelings about President Obama” by nine points (10%). Asked to select the most important issue that Congress should be dealing with next year, “the economy” (29%) is the top issue chosen by a double digit margin.

This anxiety is felt on a very personal level as well. More than three-in-four voters (77%) say they are very (35%) or somewhat (42%) worried about current economic conditions. In addition, a strong majority (56%) of voters believe that economic conditions in the country are poor and staying the same (25%) or getting worse (31%). Last, more than seven-in-ten (71%) voters believe that next generation will not be better off economically than the current generation.

These questions illustrate that while many voters want the government to take action on pocketbook issues, voters are not pleased with what President Obama has done so far. Six years of his policies have led most voters to be anxious, to believe that the economy has stagnated at best, and to think that the future is not going to get better. These attitudes need to be overcome before voters will be willing to consider any proposals. Voters need to trust in a solution if they are going to believe in it.

The level of anxiety that many voters have about their personal safety should also be a major concern for leaders in Washington. There are a startling number of voters who are worried that there will be another terrorist attack in the U.S. Fully seventy-one percent (71%) of voters indicate they are very worried (28%) or somewhat worried (43%) about the U.S. suffering another major terrorist attack. This concern crosses all major demographic lines with every major demographic group having at least a majority of it holding this level of concern about a possible terrorist attack.

A government which cannot protect your pocketbook and cannot protect your person is a government that will not meet the approval of many voters. President Obama and the new Republican Congress will have to overcome a trust deficit with voters before they can proceed with problem solving.

We believe that Republicans should feel empowered to offer solutions that put an emphasis on a less interventionist government. Voters are justifiably dissatisfied with the last six years of governing from Washington and this dissatisfaction is manifest in their frustrations about the direction of the country, their frustrations with the performance of President Obama, and their concerns about their economic and personal safety. They want a government that does more to solve their problems, but they clearly do not trust the current government to formulate the appropriate solutions. As a party, Republicans should emphasize that they want to try new and different solutions to our problems and not continue or slightly modify the abject failures of the last six years.

The best place to look to rebuild some of this trust might be to their peers in the states. Regarding their level of trust for the government in Washington and their level of trust for their state government, twice as many voters say they trust their state government just about always or most of the time (30%) than voters who hold these same positive attitudes about the federal government (15%). Republican Governors all over the country succeeded in their re-election efforts by implementing solutions that worked and showing their constituents that they were ready to make the bold reforms needed to improve the economic conditions in their state.

For 2105 and beyond, many voters will be waiting to see whether or not President Obama is willing to stop pursuing the failed policies of the past six years and join Republicans in finding innovative solutions for the future. If the President proves unwilling to work with Congressional Republicans, voters may begin turning their attention even earlier to the 2016 Presidential contenders in their efforts to find leaders willing to offer real solutions.