

Battleground Analysis:
2016: The Search for a Champion for the Middle Class

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The early stages of Hillary Clinton's Presidential campaign have featured questions and criticisms about the extent to which the Clinton family has used their political power and their charitable foundation to line their own pockets. This has included the claim by the Clinton's that giving paid speeches at a price of up to five hundred thousand dollars is just part of the work necessary to pay their bills. This is hardly an auspicious start for a candidate whose main message on her campaign website is: "Everyday Americans need a champion. I want to be that champion."

We do believe that the 2016 Presidential Election will be about the middle class of America finding a political party, and more specifically, a Presidential candidate to be its champion. This data finds that these voters are frustrated about their economic condition and anxious about the myriad threats facing America from abroad. Economically, middle class voters believe that the rich get the special benefits, the lower class gets the programs, and the middle class gets the bill. On foreign affairs, these voters are worried about looming threats from abroad and are skeptical that the Obama administration is finding solutions to threats from Iran.

Many 2016 voters will also be looking for a President and a Congress that they can trust to meet the challenges that America will be facing from abroad. For many voters, anxiety about their personal safety looms just as large as their anxiety about their financial security.

In many ways, the 2016 political environment looks to be a mirror image of the 2008 election – voters are deeply dissatisfied with the direction of the country, unhappy with the leadership of the President, and being asked to consider a candidate from the incumbent party who is a challenger turned ally of the President and potentially facing a younger and fresher challenger. The Democratic Party may well be facing the same walls that led to the defeats the Republican Party suffered in 2008.

This survey finds a strong majority (65% to 26%) of voters think the country is on the wrong track, including an overwhelming majority (54% to 11%) who "strongly" believe the country is off on the wrong track. As you might expect, this dissatisfaction with the direction of the country is high amongst Republicans (87% to 8%), but is also high with Independents (70% to 18%) – a factor that seems to have Independents leaning more Republican on a majority of other key measurements throughout the survey. In a similar way, a plurality of voters (49%) disapproves of the job performance of the President and this disapproval is notably more negative amongst both Republicans (85% disapprove and 9% approve) and Independents (57% approve and 35% disapprove).

The President's job approval has been hovering in this range of being upside down with voters somewhere in the -4 to -6 point range since the last election. What is often not reported is the "intensity" of those negatives, which in this latest G.W. Battleground Poll has only thirty-one percent (31%) of voters strongly approving of the job President Obama is doing and forty-two percent (42%) strongly disapproving of his job performance. Any Democratic candidate in 2016 will begin their effort in a tough political environment, with a political base on the left of mainstream America, and the only group of voters looking for a third term of their Party's incumbent President.

This general malaise and discontent will also be enhanced in a more tangible way by the economic anxiety that still hangs over many voters. Nearly three-in-four voters (72%) say that they are very or somewhat "worried" about another economic downturn that will negatively impact their family. This current concern about the economy is also having an impact on future concerns about the next generation and the American Dream. Almost seven-in-ten voters (69% to 24%) believe that the next generation will not be better off than the current generation – a negative level far worse than what we saw during the last days of the Jimmy Carter administration. While voters looking for economic change naturally gravitate away from the incumbent party of the White House, this survey finds that particularly true with middle class voters (which is 7 in 10 voters.) In fact, with middle class voters, Republicans go into the 2016 election with an issue handling advantage over the Democrats on both the economy (+15%) and taxes (+9%), and have wrestled the traditional double-digit Democratic advantage on jobs to a 45%-46% split. A Republican Presidential candidate who seizes the mantle of fighting for the middle class will find a lot of voters who will be very receptive to their campaign, especially in contrast to a Democratic nominee who is framed within the narrative of representing a third term of Barack Obama.

This will also be the most foreign policy oriented Presidential campaign since 2004. We asked voters to select the most important issue for the next President to focus on. As one would expect, the top tier issues were the economy (23%) and jobs (14%). However, the next most selected issue was foreign threats (12%). In fact, foreign threats is a notable issue of concern to both base Republican voting blocs like conservative Republicans and white married women as well as to key swing voting blocs like white millennials, Hispanic men, married mothers, and church attending Catholics. These voters with concerns about foreign threats are unlikely to embrace a Democratic candidate with a mixed record at best as our nation's chief diplomat. In fact, it did not go without notice that when Hillary Clinton rolled out her campaign announcement she said little to nothing about foreign affairs or her role as Secretary of State for the first four years of the Obama administration.

In addition, the Republican Party has a nine-point advantage over the Democratic Party on the issue of which party is better equipped to deal with foreign affairs – an advantage that grows to eighteen-points with middle class voters and twenty-eight points with

White middle class voters. Both the Republican candidate for President and their political party should have a notable advantage over their Democratic opponents on this important issue.

Supporters of President Obama and the Democratic Party will point to the seemingly positive foreign policy data in this survey and argue that the President will be able to use these advantages to shore up this deficit. A closer look at the data illustrates that this is folly. While a majority (51%) of voters do approve of the efforts that the US is making against ISIS, voters with strong views on this issue split nearly evenly with twenty-eight percent (28%) approving strongly and with twenty-seven percent (27%) disapproving strongly.

There is a similar trend regarding the recent agreement over Iran's nuclear program. Fully sixty-four percent (64%) of voters are aware of this agreement. However, among those voters aware of the agreement, voters split almost evenly with forty-six percent (46%) supporting Senate approval of this deal and with forty-seven percent (47%) opposing Senate approval of this deal.

Foreign policy initiatives and military efforts usually have their strongest level of support at the outset before the inevitable and often tragic consequences of these policies begin to accumulate. For both the effort against ISIS and the nuclear agreement with Iran to begin with such tepid support at this beginning stage does not bode well for how voters will look at these efforts in November 2016.

The data about the likely 2016 Presidential candidates also illustrates the challenges for the Democrats and the opportunities for the Republicans in the 2016 cycle. On name identification, the presumptive Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, is at parity overall 47% favorable and 48% unfavorable, but there is a notable negative intensity gap much like that of the President's, with twenty-seven percent (27%) strongly favorable and thirty-nine percent (39%) strongly unfavorable. Equally notable is that ninety-five percent of voters have an impression of Hillary Clinton. She cannot re-introduce herself on her terms to the vast majority of the electorate. Her challenge is the much more formidable one of getting voters to change their attitudes about her.

In contrast, while the Republican candidates tested – Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Mike Huckabee, and Carly Fiorina – also face an electorate that retreats to their partisan corners in their initial assessment of a candidate, they have a much greater share of the electorate who have not yet developed an image of them. Even with this partisan divide, Walker (22% favorable/19% unfavorable), Rubio (31% favorable/30% unfavorable), and Huckabee (34% favorable/33% unfavorable) are all at parity or above on their image. However, all of these potential candidates, even the ones who have officially announced that they are running for President, have vast sections of the electorate who have not yet developed an image of them, ranging from

seventy-three percent (73%) with no image of Fiorina to seventeen percent (17%) for Jeb Bush. Whoever the Republican nominee is, that candidate will have the opportunity through a competitive primary and caucus season to introduce themselves on their terms to many voters. As we have seen in the past, as candidates surface through the victories of those early competitive contests, those candidates will almost certainly be seen as a fresher face than that of the largely uncontested nominee for the opposing party.

So, as we move into a summer which will see the race for the 2016 Presidential nomination intensify with more candidates entering the race and with more scrutiny being paid to the announced candidates, Republicans begin this 2016 campaign in a strong position to make substantial gains, including contesting the White House. Most Americans think of themselves as middle class, regardless of their income level. Indeed, this survey finds that seventy percent (70%) of Americans self-identify as middle class. This middle class mentality means that the overwhelming majority of Americans that are the middle class are looking for a fighter and a champion for their forgotten interests and the fading American Dream.

It is interesting the Democrats seem to believe they can replicate the 2008-2012 electorate. We have seen this play before – it is usually on our side! The Democrats will have a largely uncontested and well defined nominee from a party whose President has gotten the country off on the wrong track, has failed to create an economy in which people are optimistic about their future or that of the next generation, and has created a foreign policy that receives a lukewarm reception from voters and does not ease concerns about terrorism within our shores. A fatally flawed nominee, who, like the rich, is seen as playing by a different set of rules, and who is increasingly tone-deaf. A well defined nominee trying to morph into a candidate the times demand, but tied to an outgoing President only liked and respected by the base, while all the incoming shots from the opposing party will be well focused from the very beginning because that nominee is largely uncontested and the sole target. It's like running a race with blinders on a track full of not just potholes, but landmines.

On the other side will be a party led by a large field of diverse Presidential candidates, that in the process of winning and breaking out of that field, will be seen as younger, fresher, and bolder than the Democratic nominee, and who will be offering new solutions to the economic, domestic, and foreign problems facing the country. Yes, we have seen this play before and know how it is likely to end. This is a political environment and a trend that strongly favors the Republican Party and its eventual nominee.