

Battleground 2014: Even With the Best Intentions...

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“The road to hell is paved with good intentions”

No one historical figure can claim ownership of this aphorism, but its sentiment certainly rings true in this data. Since our October 2013 Battleground Poll, the shaky rollout of Obamacare has continued and the Nation’s perpetually weak economy limps along with employment of the adult workforce at a thirty-eight year low, leading likely voters to continue to hold remarkably negative views about the political environment and their political leaders, especially the current administration. Clearly the American electorate is growing weary of a President who is very good at hiding behind his intentions, while demonizing the intentions of his opponents, only to show little if any improvements in the daily lives of those he claims to be fighting for.

Indeed, nearly seven-in-ten (67%) likely voters believe the country is on the wrong track – fifty-six percent (56%) believe the country is “strongly” off on the wrong track. This dissatisfaction with the direction of the country has more than eight-in-ten (86%) voters saying that when it comes to solving problems, they believe leaders in Washington have gotten worse (32%) or stayed the same (54%) at this task. In October 2013, voters identified the inability of Washington to solve problems as their top concern. Clearly, most voters enter 2014 believing that Washington has gotten no better at finding solutions.

This frustration leads majorities of voters to disapprove of the job performance of President Obama (54%), with the ratio of voters “strongly” disapproving of the job performance of President Obama over those who “strongly” approve now at a five-year high of 1.7 to 1 negative. Congress also is a target of some of the voters’ wrath with eighty-one percent (81%) of voters disapproving of the institution of Congress and the job they are doing, and by a 29% to 54% margin saying it is time for a new person. At the same time, there has been a reversal since last fall in the job approval of voters’ individual Member of Congress and their job approval. A plurality (47%) of voters now approve of the job performance of their Member of Congress compared to forty-four percent (44%) who disapprove.

It does appear, whether you call it voter angst, voter frustration, or voter anger, it is being dropped right on the doorstep of the Obama White House. Not only is the President facing extremely high and intense job disapproval numbers, he now has a majority of voters disapproving of the job he is doing on all six of the other specific measurements we tested in this latest Battleground poll. The President faces a significant challenge with voters as he has a majority disapproval rating on the economy (57% disapprove), on working with Congress (56% disapprove), on the federal budget and spending (63% disapprove), on Jobs (54% disapprove), on Taxes (53% disapprove), and on solving problems (51% disapprove). Policy mavens can debate whether or not Congress has done enough to meet the President halfway on finding solutions to major issues, but this data makes clear that a majority of voters are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with his efforts thus far on each and every one of these crucial issues.

In addition, the President continues to face the ongoing saga of not only the rollout of Obamacare, but also the impact of millions of cancelled health care policies, and in many cases, the loss for many Americans of their ability to keep their preferred doctor. It certainly was not helpful to the President's attempt to paint the best picture of Obamacare that 2013 ended with Politifact naming the President's often repeated statement that "If you like your health care plan, you can keep it," as the 2013 "Lie of the Year!" As one would expect after the numerous failures during the rollout, and over six million canceled health care policies, fifty-six percent (56%) of voters oppose Obamacare – a whopping forty-nine percent (49%) strongly disapprove.

Adding to the troubles of the future prospects of the President and his "Affordable Health Care Act," is the Administration's preferred solution of numerous delays and offering more flexibility regarding the penalties associated with the law that only reinforces with the voters that no matter its intentions, the law is flawed. Overall, a plurality of voters (49%) believe that Obamacare goes too far, more than twice the twenty-three percent (23%) of voters who believe that the law does not go far enough. The segment of voters, who still largely support Obamacare, but push back by saying that it does not go far enough, has dwindled down to core elements of the President's base – voters under age 30, African Americans, strong Democrats, and liberals.

With Obamacare struggling to garner support, President Obama and the Democrats have indicated that they want to return to a more reliable political play – class warfare – and have been telegraphing their strategy to push “income inequality” as their rally cry for months now. However, the central premise of their campaign – the national economy has improved while your personal economic situation has declined – is not quite panning out and is certainly refuted by this data. While seventy-seven percent (77%) of voters feel that their personal economic situation either stayed the same or has gotten worse over the last four years, two-thirds of voters (65%) also believe the national economy has either stayed the same or has gotten worse over the last four years. While as a general theme, the President and the Democrats may be onto something – forty-nine percent (49%) of voters state that income inequality is a big problem, and another thirty percent (30%) say it is somewhat of a problem. However, as seen with Obamacare, while many voters may agree that income inequality is a problem in need of a solution, voters are sharply divided on the appropriate solution to this problem. In a forced choice question, forty-five percent (45%) believe that cutting taxes and removing regulations is the best solution while another forty-three percent (43%) select closing the gap between the rich and the poor.

As one would expect, partisans retreat to their corners in this debate. Democrats, Africans Americans, and liberals strongly back closing the gap while Republicans, strong Tea Party supporters, and very conservative voters back cutting taxes and regulations. However, if this is an issue that Democrats expect will lure middle class voters and Independents to their side, they may have a long wait. As this debate begins, neither of these groups is particularly inclined to the side of the Democratic solution on this issue. Independents favor cutting taxes (45%) over closing the gap (37%), as do middle class voters who are also more inclined to select cutting taxes (47%) to closing the gap (41%). Another common aphorism in politics is that “if you are explaining, you are losing”. On this issue, the President will need to do a significant amount of explaining to bring this critical coalition over to his side. That is as long as Republicans don’t sit back and allow the President and Democrats to demonize them as not caring about people. This is not a battle about who cares about people. This is a battle about opportunity, and a battle for the middle class. And right now, Republicans start this battle from the high ground.

Looking ahead to November, Republicans remain in a strong position to make substantial gains in the Senate and hold, or even build, on their majorities in the House in the elections this fall. After the dust has settled over the battles last fall on spending and the budget, government shutdown, and Obamacare, Republicans come out on top, and the generic Congressional ballot stands – Republicans at forty-three percent (43%) and Democrats at forty-one percent (41%). Given the Democrats’ significant edge in super-majority districts, this national two-point edge really represents a substantial advantage for the GOP. Republicans are slightly more loyal in their voting for the generic Republican candidate (+87-points), than Democrats are about voting for their generic candidate (+82-points), but with a 4-point advantage on the Battleground Poll’s sample, that is only enough to even the playing field. It is Republican’s 14-point lead with Independents that give the Republicans the 43%-41% edge on the generic ballot.

Republicans’ closing of their deficit with women has also had a positive impact on the generic ballot. While Republicans hold an 11-point lead with men (49% to 38%), they now only have a 6-points deficit with women voters (38% to 44%). While Republicans are still losing on the generic ballot with African American women (9% to 86%) and Hispanic women (25% to 47%), White women are now voting Republican on the generic ballot by 8-points (45% to 37%). As important, the married gap amongst White women has closed substantially, White married women voting Republican by +14-points, and single White women voting Republican on the generic ballot by +9-points. In what appears to be problematic for President Obama and the Democrats with gaining back support amongst these White female voters is their lower support is being driven from multiple angles. In fact, they are more negative than their White male counterparts on the direction of the country, more negative about Obamacare, and more negative about the Nation’s economy.

While Republicans hold strong leads with many of their core, base voters – married voters (+14), active church attendees (+18), seniors (+7), conservatives (+49) – all of these add up to Republicans leading with “middle class” voters by a 45% to 40% margin. This is a margin that only grows when you look at middle class families or white middle class voters that are so much of a target in Democrats class warfare messaging, and promise to be again in the 2014 Election.

As we saw in the early days of Obamacare, the President can choose to appeal to Independent and swing voters on major policy initiatives in a way he begins to build his image and job approval ratings, or for the off-year elections he can focus on driving up the intensity of his base supporters whose high level support is crucial in any off-year election. On the issue of income inequality, however, which the President has telegraphed as being a major focus of his 2014 legislative agenda, if Republicans understand this is truly a battle for economic opportunity of the middle class, and play offense not defense on the issue, it is unlikely the President will be able to move either Independents or middle class voters with the class warfare rhetoric of “Income Inequality,” especially in light of an economy that is limping along at best.

In sum, Democrats often place a premium on intentions while Republicans often place their premium on results. This data finds that while the President may have the best intentions for improving the national economy, reforming the health care system, and dealing with income inequality, the majority of voters are dissatisfied with his results on these and other issues. As more voters grow dissatisfied with these results, they will give serious consideration to giving more power to the political party most focused on results. Results matter and the results to date of the Obama Administration should not be satisfactory to any voter.