

Election 2012: Challenges Ahead for Both Parties

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In an election year when an incumbent is running for re-election, late winter to early spring is, more often than not, a time when the incumbent begins to gain a more solid footing in framing the general election, and the challenger party is struggling with moving beyond the necessity to focus on the primary electorate, and beginning to draw the contrast between themselves and the incumbent. Even against the most endangered incumbent, February, March, and even April, is a time when the process of reelecting or rejecting the incumbent has not yet begun for the vast majority of the American electorate.

It is also a time of warning signs for both the incumbent party of the White House and the party that is set on replacing that incumbent. There are also signs that could lead both sides to be optimistic about victory in November, none of which are predictive of the ultimate outcome. It is a time when the campaign is beginning in earnest.

This Presidential race is following this time-honored pattern. The vigorous and hotly contested Republican Primary campaign has clearly kept the message focused inward, while having an impact with the broader group of voters. The two frontrunners for the Republican nomination Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney certainly have strong favorable ratings with Republican voters – Santorum 71% favorable/12% unfavorable and Romney 68% favorable 22% unfavorable – but the entire Republican field has not yet begun to message much beyond that primary electorate. Rick Santorum, who is essentially the new kid on the block, has a favorable image with a plurality of the electorate (39% favorable to 36% unfavorable), but the other three Republican candidates are “upside down” with their unfavorable image exceeding their favorable image with the overall electorate. The candidates who have been in the national spotlight longer -- Gingrich (26% favorable to 62% unfavorable) and Romney (38% favorable to 51% unfavorable) – have actually reached a majority unfavorable rating while Ron Paul (30% favorable to 46% unfavorable) holds a plurality unfavorable rating. The bottom line being, this is a trend that must

be reversed before the general election if Republicans expect to be truly competitive in the fall in the Presidential election.

The impact of this contested primary is also seen on the Presidential ballots where Barak Obama has pushed his ballot support over 50% and now holds a nine-point lead over Romney (52%-43%) and a ten-point lead over Santorum (53%-43%) – with the key point being that the President is now running ahead of the generic ballot by four-points for the first time and the two Republican candidates are running behind the generic ballot (which is 49% Obama and 44% for the Republican).

Again, nothing in this latest Battleground poll data is totally unexpected for this stage of a presidential election cycle, and certainly not predictive of the eventual outcome. The warning signs are flashing for Republicans, however, and it is certainly a phase of the campaign that Republicans need to bring to an end sooner as opposed to later.

It is clear that the Republican Party needs a national unifying voice in the person of a Presidential nominee. Having one national voice who can re-focus voters on the failed policies and empty promises of the President Obama administration instead of the current daily routine of primary debates, charges, and counter-charges will go a long way towards getting our Party back on track for defeating President Obama in November.

Most races with an incumbent running for reelection are about the incumbent and this data clearly indicates that President Obama will face significant challenges in making his case with voters for four more years. While the President does enjoy majority approval on both his overall job approval rating (53% approve) and his personal approval rating (74% approve), The President is still upside down with those voters who feel strongly about the job he is doing and he continues to struggle on the issues that concern voters the most. On the issue matrix, seventy percent (70%) of voters select a pocketbook issue as their top concern, including the economy (23%), jobs (20%), and government spending/deficit (15%). When voters are asked their assessment of President Obama on these specific pocketbook issues, he fares poorly. A majority of voters disapprove of his handling of the economy (51% disapprove). A majority of voters

disapprove of his handling of jobs (50% disapprove), and a majority of voters disapprove of his handling of the federal budget and spending (59% disapprove).

In addition, continuing a trend seen on the last Battleground, a majority of voters (51%) disapprove of the job that the President is doing dealing with Congress. However, a strong majority of Democrats (74%) approve of the job that the President is doing dealing with Congress. His base is clearly pleased with the increasingly confrontational rhetoric and behavior that the President has shown towards Congress, particularly the House of Representatives. However, the remainder of the electorate is not pleased with these maneuverings. The President will continue to have to choose between feeding the passions of his base through executive fiats that circumvent Congress and the type of steady governing that the rest of the electorate wants.

The President also faces the challenge that many Americans at a fundamental level are not happy with the direction of the country and certainly are not optimistic that the future will be better. In modern Presidential elections, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton all won reelection in part because they could offer voters hope that the next four years would be better. At present, a strong majority (59%) of voters believe that the country is on the wrong track, including strong majorities of key voting blocs like seniors (60%), Republicans (92%), Independents (65%), and college graduates (59%). Looking towards the future, a strong majority (59%) of voters believe that the next generation will not be better off than the current generation. (With a full 75% of those largely middleclass voters, who believe the country is going off in the wrong direction also saying they believe that their children will not do as well as they have.) An electorate filled with voters unhappy with the present and with voters lacking confidence about the future is not one that any incumbent would like to face. A few months of better employment numbers does not a reelection make, with gas prices threatening to bring down the entire house of cards that is the Obama economic policy.

Looking towards the race for control of Congress, the advantage for Republicans is much clearer. While the job approval rating for Congress remains at historical lows (83% disapprove), voters divide evenly on the job performance about their own Member of Congress (44% approve/43% disapprove). Republicans are in a statistical tie with Democrats on the generic Congressional

ballot (45%-Republicans/47% Democrats). Given the institutional three to five-point advantage that Democrats typically enjoy on the generic ballot, the fact that Republicans are within two points is a sign of optimism for the GOP.

Without fail, winter passes and spring is around the corner with the season of re-birth and renewal. Republicans will be well served to have selected a Presidential nominee by spring so they move their focus from examining the faults of our Presidential contenders to illustrating to voters the failures and wrong direction of the past four years. We have the environment and the issues that question the current direction of the country. With a Presidential nominee, we will be able to use these opportunities to make our case to the voters.