

## **Battleground 54: The Middle Class Strikes Back**

**By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber**

Just as we were conducting our final interviews of this latest edition of The George Washington University Battleground last Thursday, President Barack Obama was delivering a speech to a group of Democratic donors down in Miami. As we began to comb over the detailed crosstabs Friday morning, the data seemed to match up with the headlines from President Obama's speech the night before, quoting the President as saying that Democrats tend to "get clobbered" in midterm elections. Certainly there was a lot in the data that would confirm that that may well be the case in the 2014 Midterm elections. Vote intensity of self-identified Republican voters is back up to a seven-point lead over Democratic voters (the lead is 11-points with behavioral Republican voters), by a 64% to 28% margin voters say the direction of the country is off on the wrong track ("strongly" off on the wrong track now runs over 4 to 1 negative), both the President's image and job approval continue to be upside down, his job approval continuing to run at a historically high 1.7 to 1 ratio on strongly disapprove to strongly approve, and the generic Congressional ballot running even. In addition, among the 60% of the respondents who say they are extremely likely to vote, Republicans lead on the generic Congressional ballot by five points (45% to 40%).

Yes, the data, both the top line data and the crosstabs, seemed to confirm the President's point about Democrats tending to "get clobbered" in off-year elections. But then, as more details about the President Obama's Thursday night speech came in, the President's talking points and the data from the Battleground survey swung in wildly different directions. The President seemed to be giving a speech to Democratic donors that was taking them through the five stages of grief (denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), rather than a speech that in any way connected with the political reality of today's political environment. Biggest on the hit list was the President's statement that "Americans agree with Democrats on EVERY issue!" Really Mr. President . . . every issue? It may be denial on the part of the President or it may be isolation, but every national poll over the past four years has shown a majority of voters disapproving of ObamaCare.

The President went on to say that the reason Americans don't vote even though they agree with Democrats on every issue, is that, Washington politics has "become so toxic" that they are not voting. Again, the reality of the data jumps right off the page. In this latest Battleground poll, we tested eleven questions about the president's job approval on issues as well as the traditional "job approval" question. Not only was every one of the twelve questions upside down with a negative response, including eight of the twelve having a majority of voters disapproving of the job the President is doing – everything from the economy, to jobs, to working with congress, to the budget and spending, to foreign policy – the average response when looking at strongly approve versus strongly disapprove was a net 17-points "strongly disapprove." The political environment is toxic, but what is really toxic, both in Washington and across the country, is President Barack Obama's job approval at every level.

What we have found as we look deeper into the data of this latest Battleground poll is the power of President Obama to lead has dwindled to almost nothing. He may still be able to rally base Democratic voters, but his capacity to lead the totality of the American Electorate has ended.

This frustration with the President and the toxicity of the political environment is also having an impact on voter attitudes about the Democratic Party as a whole. On a series of issue handling measures, the GOP is winning on issues like the economy, the federal budget and spending, taxes, and foreign policy. This willingness of the electorate to consider Republican proposals is a stunning reversal for our party.

In less than two years, the President has squandered the advantages gained from his re-election and put his party in the worst position imaginable. Democratic candidates will be facing the wrath of voters over the policy stumbles of the Obama administration, but they will not enjoy the advantages of having a Presidential turnout operation to aid their campaigns.

In our view the key demographic of this election cycle will be *middle class voters*. These are the voters most likely to be affected by the premium increases from Obamacare and the voters most likely to still be anxious about the national economy. As seen in the charts below, the advantage of the Republican Party on every one of these pocketbook issues is stronger among middle class voters – who make up 72% of the American Electorate.

All Voters			Middle Class Voters		
Issue	GOP	Democrats	Issue	GOP	Democrats
<b>The economy</b>	47%	43%	<b>The economy</b>	49%	41%
<b>Federal budget and spending</b>	48%	41%	<b>Federal budget and spending</b>	50%	39%
<b>Jobs</b>	44%	45%	<b>Jobs</b>	46%	44%
<b>Taxes</b>	47%	44%	<b>Taxes</b>	50%	42%
<b>Foreign policy</b>	47%	42%	<b>Foreign policy</b>	48%	42%

\*\* Editors note – Because the African American community is so monolithic in their support of Barack Obama and (to a lesser extent) the Democratic Party, they water down how well Republicans are fairing with the middle class. For example, on the issue of the economy, African American middle class voters put their confidence in the Democratic Party by a 90% to 10% margin. On the other hand, Hispanic middle class voters give the edge on the economy to the Republicans by a 49% to 40% margin, and white middle class voters give the edge to Republicans by a 55% to 34% margin. When looking at issues addressed in the chart above, white middle class voters give the edge to Republicans on the economy by 21-points, Federal budget and spending by 21-points, jobs by 14-points, taxes by 20-points, and Foreign policy by 15-points.

For many voters, their vote this November will be for the candidate who will do the most to improve their personal economic situation and keep them safe from looming threats abroad. As of now, Republicans hold the advantage on these issues, both overall and with the key demographic group of middle class voters this election cycle.

The President too must be feeling and seeing these advantages slip away. More than six-in-ten (61%) of voters believe the national economy has gotten worse (41%) or stayed the same (20%) over the past four years. (That 61% grows to 73% when voters are asked about their own personal economic situation.) Among those who think the national economy has gotten worse, a majority (52%), believe that either President Obama (34%) or the Democrats in Congress (18%) are most responsible for the current state of the national economy. The President needed a new villain for the economic anxiety of the middle class and he found one – income inequality.

So, now there is a move to gin up voter anger over the general unfairness of our economic system, which must be the fault of the GOP. However, there are two reasons why this approach is also fatally flawed.

First, voters do not hold cohesive views about the national economy being rigged against them. In a series of statements, a majority of voters agreed that anyone could get ahead through hard work and that they are optimistic about where they will be financially five years from now. However, a majority of voters also agreed in this very same series of questions that:

- The next generation will not be better off economically;
- It is too tough for middle class families to make ends meet;
- People who work hard and play by the rules do not seem to get ahead; and
- The economic rules in our country unfairly favor rich people.

In a series of eight questions, voters both agreed with broadly optimistic statements about our economic system, and agreed with broadly pessimistic statements about our national economy.

In addition to the mixed views of voters about our economic system, few voters are likely to embrace the top down solutions to income inequality that the Obama administration is embracing. We asked voters to select which of these “bigs” was the biggest obstacle to them getting ahead – government, labor, business, banks, all, or none. Not surprisingly given the frustration and anxiety of the electorate, the plurality of voters selected all (35%). However, the next most commonly selected obstacle was “Big Government” (23%) – with Big Labor at 2%, Big Banks at 5%, and Big Business at 6%. Offering a big government solution to an economic problem will not be a winning gambit with voters who see the government as the biggest obstacle to their economic mobility. After all, their last big government solution, ObamaCare, is yet to be accepted by the voters – especially middle class voters.