

## **The 2012 Presidential Election – Referendum or Choice?**

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The economic and political environment of the 2012 campaign has forced Barack Obama to wage two campaigns – one campaign against Mitt Romney and one campaign against a bad economy, driven by his own failed economic policies. In 2008, Barack Obama won with an aspirational campaign, promising hope for all, and change for the country. Now, nearly four years later, sixty-one percent (61%) of Americans believe the country is off on the wrong track, and an even more striking majority (54%) of American voters “strongly” believes their country is off on the wrong track.

The American Electorate’s judgments of President Obama and his handling of the issues most important to them are just as harsh. Nearly seven in ten voters select pocketbook issues as their top concern, including twenty-six percent (26%) of voters who select the economy, seventeen percent (17%) of voters who select government spending and the deficit, and fifteen percent (15%) of voters who select jobs. No other issue ranks in double digits. As Mitt Romney said recently – “it’s still the economy . . . and we’re not stupid.” In fact, even with the President’s overall job performance running at 49% disapproval, with this very focused concern of the American Electorate on the economy, it is here where the President gets his worst marks. Overwhelming majorities of voters disapprove of the job performance of President Obama on the economy (54% disapprove, 45% strongly), on the federal budget and spending (61% disapprove, 52% strongly), and on taxes (50% disapprove, 38% strongly).

Even more problematic for the Obama re-election campaign is that voters’ dissatisfaction with the job performance of President Obama is not only wide, but it also runs very deep. In fact, voters who disapprove of Barack Obama in his handling of economic issues are nearly monolithic in their concern with the direction of the country. These voters all overwhelmingly believe that the country is on the wrong track, ranging from those who disapprove of President Obama’s performance on spending (86% wrong track), to those who disapprove of his performance on taxes (91% wrong track) to those who disapprove of his performance on the economy (93% wrong track), to those who disapprove of the President’s overall job performance (98% wrong track). For these voters, this election is clearly a referendum on President Obama. Over these final weeks of the campaign, he will need to convince these voters that they are wrong in their judgment of his performance on the economy and spending and convince them that he

is a better alternative than Mitt Romney. That is a big task for any politician, especially under the shadow of an economy that has had an unemployment rate over 8% for forty-three months, and twenty-three million Americans are either unemployed, underemployed, or have given up looking for a job. The one thing that is clear, blaming Bush is no longer a valid argument in most voters' minds. Barack Obama won the election in 2008, leaving no doubt in voters' minds that the economy was bad and that, if elected, he would fix it.

We continue to hold the belief that this election will remain close until the final weeks of the campaign. There will be ups and downs for both campaigns throughout the next 13 weeks, but the basic dynamics that are driving this electorate and framing this election remain well in place. In fact, the Obama versus Romney ballot match-up illustrates the successes of both campaigns and the challenges facing both campaigns. On the overall ballot, Obama leads by just two-points (48%-46%). In contrast to our previous studies, both candidates have now secured their base vote – Romney is at ninety percent (90%) support from self-identified Republicans while Obama is at ninety-one percent (91%) support from Democrats. Romney holds overwhelming majority support from those who disapprove of the job performance of President Obama on the economy (82%) and those who disapprove of Obama's performance on the federal budget and spending (75%). The challenge for both campaigns, even at this relatively early stage of the campaign, is the limited number of persuadable voters. Overall, just twenty percent (20%) of voters have not yet made a definite choice and just twenty percent (20%) of voters making a choice on the ballot say they would even consider voting for the other candidate, with many of those voters ultimately being non-participants in the 2012 Elections.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the tens of millions of campaign dollars spent over the airwaves by the Obama campaign over the last two months and the fact that the campaign's "burn rate" has done little more than tread water because it has failed to move the dial on the ballot. At the ballot score level, this assertion is true. In fairness, however, this latest Battleground Poll data does show these tens of millions of campaign dollars have bought the President's campaign something – increased voting enthusiasm among Democratic voters. In analyzing those voters who state they are extremely likely to vote, whereas in the last Battleground Poll in June Republicans had a nine-point advantage on voter enthusiasm, the playing field between Republican and Democratic voters is much more even. Democratic voters now have a minor enthusiasm

advantage when looking at party identification (+1%) and only a minor disadvantage when looking at party vote behavior (-2%). Even that, however, is a somewhat hollow victory for the Obama campaign. What the heavy spending rate of the Obama Campaign has not bought is an enthusiasm advantage over Romney voters. In fact, Romney voters continue to hold at a seven-point intensity advantage over that of Obama voters (77% to 70%). The President has brought many of his base supporters home, but this is clearly not enough for him to reach majority support on the ballot, and is clearly offset by the ten-point advantage Romney holds with Independent voters, many of them being the “Angry Independents” of the 2012 election cycle.

This positive intensity gap for Romney is likely to remain, and once again leads to the ongoing question of whether this election will be a referendum on the incumbent president, or a choice between the Republican and Democratic candidates for president. The data in this latest Battleground Poll certainly leads to the conclusion that this election will be a referendum on President Obama. Respondents in the latest Battleground Poll were asked after the presidential ballot whether they were casting their votes as a vote for their candidate, or against the candidate from the other party. A majority (52%) of Romney voters define their vote as being against Barack Obama. Once these voters have moved against an incumbent President they have judged to be a failure, it is hard to win these voters back. In contrast, more than three-in-four (77%) Obama voters describe their vote as being for the President. Certainly as the presidential campaign progresses through the fall, voters will have to decide which of the two candidates, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, has a better vision for where to take America, but the cornerstone of that decision will come from the referendum on how they feel about the job performance of the current incumbent President. As the President faces the challenges of the fall campaign, it is doubtful he will regain his luster with any of the voters who have given up on him. It will be a significant enough challenge for him to keep these voters currently in his camp and enthused about voting.

In fact, we see signs of that already and the President’s vaunted likeability is no longer the massive advantage it once was. On name awareness, Obama leads Romney by just four-points in terms of favorability (50% to 46%). On the unfavorable side, even though their unfavorable ratings are fairly equal (47% Obama to 46% Romney), Obama actually has a higher “strongly unfavorable” score (39%) than Romney (33%). It will increasingly be hard for the Democrats to argue that the President will be able to win re-election due

to a likeability advantage over Mitt Romney since this advantage has all but faded, much like his fundraising advantage in recent months.

Our look at issue handling comparisons between the candidates is a terrific sign of why this election is likely to be a referendum on Obama's failed economic policies, and why the Obama campaign wants this election to be about another metric. Romney holds advantages over Obama on jobs (50% to 44%), the economy (49% to 44%), and can get things done (47% to 41%). Obama holds advantages over Romney on several other issues, most notably on standing up for the middle class (54% to 40%) and on shares your values (49% to 45%) – two of the major thematic pushes of his campaign recently. Of most concern to the Obama campaign, however, should be the question over who “can get things done” where Mitt Romney has a six-point lead over Barack Obama. In a political environment of a stagnant, if not worsening, economy, the candidate that is seen by voters as best in getting things done may be the final vote determinate in this campaign.

The President has settled on the campaign slogan “Forward”, presumably to indicate his desire to lead the nation in a positive direction forward economically. However, a strong majority (65%) of voters believe the economy is not moving (24%) or moving in a negative direction (41%). A similarly strong majority of voters (64%) believe the economy will be not moving or moving in a negative direction three months from now. This pessimism is driven in part by the majority (58%) of voters who believe the impact of the President's economic policies has either been negative, or had no impact. In yet another indictment of the failure of the President to inspire optimism, more than six-in-ten (63%) voters now believe the next generation will not be better off economically.

In sum, voters will be taking the measure of both Presidential nominees over these next three months. The challenge facing President Obama will be that many voters have judged his policies to be failures, and voters may well decide that they want to move forward . . . with the ideas of someone else.