

Election 2012: The Race to November Begins

By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber

This latest edition of the Politico/George Washington University Battleground Poll, once again reinforces our long held belief that the 2012 Presidential Election will likely be a very close election right until the end. From a head-to-head ballot in which the candidates are in a dead heat, to numerous other indicators, it seems clear that the days leading up to Election Day will be drama-filled, and as likely to be decided by the ground war as the battle waged over the airwaves.

Setting the closeness of the election aside for a second, this data does indicate that Mitt Romney has transitioned well from the Republican primary, moving into the general election campaign in a much stronger position than many pundits would have assumed a few short months ago. Most important, Mitt Romney now seems well positioned to make a compelling case to the broader electorate. At the outset, it should be noted that this should have been a time when President Obama was at his strongest. A time period when the President has been able to take his case to voters, while Mitt Romney was wrapped up in a competitive primary fending off attacks from his rivals for the Republican nomination. That is not the case, however. Mitt Romney not only leads President Obama by one-point (48% to 47%), but holds a six-point lead (51% to 45%) with those voters that are “extremely likely” to vote.

One reason for the tightness of the race is Republicans have already united behind Romney. In fact, two factors come into play here, both of which are currently benefiting Mitt Romney – the vote intensity gap and party loyalty. With the vote intensity gap, Republicans (78% stating they are extremely likely to vote) have a nine-point vote intensity advantage over both Democratic voters (at 69%) and Independents (at 69%). On the actual ballot, Romney is also benefitting from a five-point advantage in “party loyalty,” winning with Republicans by an eighty-eight percent margin at the same time that President Obama is winning with Democratic voters by an eighty-three percent margin. The vote intensity gap is not a surprise (although higher than in recent months), but the party loyalty shown by Republicans at this point in the campaign certainly is a surprise. The bottom line, illustrated in this data, is the primary is over, and Republicans are clearly ready to support their nominee in making Obama a one term President.

The second reason for the closeness of the Presidential election at this point in time is that Mitt Romney has built up a ten-point lead with Independent voters – Romney 48% and Obama 38%. As is often the case in close Presidential elections, Independents may

very well be the deciding factor in the 2012 election. What is not often discussed is that about two-thirds of the Independent voters who will cast their vote this November vote in every Presidential election (and often split their vote fairly evenly between the two parties), but that last third of the Independent voters are a wild card and float in and out of the Presidential elections. We believe these less active Independent voters are driven by “angry” Independents from year to year. The one thing you can safely say is that the angry Independents of the 2012 election will not be the same angry Independents of the 2008 election.

In the 2012 election, the data certainly points to an angry Independent vote that will not be favorable to President Obama. While the President is upside down with his job approval on a majority of issue areas, with independents, his disapproval measurements are higher than average, and in some cases significantly higher. Here are just a few examples; with his handling of the economy, the President is upside down by a net eight-points, with Independent voters, his net disapproval rating is net negative by twenty-nine-points. With jobs, Obama’s disapproval grows from a net negative two-points to a net negative eighteen-points – with spending, from net negative twenty-three-points to a whopping net negative forty-six-point disapproval. The deep hole in which the President finds himself with Independents is best illustrated in Independent voters’ response to the Battleground Poll’s reelect question in this most recent data. When asked about the reelection of President Obama, 27% said that they planned on voting to reelect the president, 20% would consider someone else, 10% said they were unsure, and a full 43% said that they will vote to replace Obama when they vote this November. (Again, this points to a very different “angry” Independent voter in 2012 than was the case in 2008)

Mitt Romney also holds the advantage amongst another key voter group – often highlighted by many Democratic political operatives in their talking points about the President’s “likeability” factor – voters who disapprove of the job the President is doing, but at the same time like the President. In this latest Battleground Poll, a full twenty-four Percent (24%) of the voters fall into the category of voters who disapprove of the job that Obama is doing, but like him personally. For the Democrats to focus on the likeability factor at the current time, however, largely appears to be “fools gold.” Of those voters who approve of the President personally but disapprove of the job performance of the President, 68% say that they will vote to replace him, 20% say they will consider someone else, 6% are unsure, and only 6% say they will vote to reelect Obama as president in November. Democrats often site these voters as open to persuasion about the merits of the Obama Presidency, but an overwhelming majority of these voters are now Romney supporters.

The overriding factor here with an overwhelming number of voters, whether they “like” the President or not, is the economy. With those voters whose top concern is a pocketbook issue (currently 70% of the electorate), Romney leads Obama by nine-points on the ballot (52%-43%). This focus on the economy within the electorate also appears to be closing the margin with the gender gap. Despite all the chatter about Romney’s inability to connect with female voters, Romney leads by seventeen points with white women (56%-39%), only slightly off from the twenty-point advantage Mitt Romney receives from white men. The connection between Romney and these voters appear to be driven by the economy. White women are the largest sub-group of female voters, and when asked to compare the two presidential candidates on the economy, they give Romney a sixteen-point advantage (54%-38%) over President Obama. As Romney said in his most recent primary night speech – “it is still the economy, and we are not stupid.”

On a broader scale, there are warning signs throughout the data for President Obama that would be significant for any incumbent President. A strong majority of the voters (59% and a two-to-one margin) believe the country is on the wrong track. More than seven-in-ten voters cite an economic issue as their top concern, and the President has a majority disapproving of his job performance on the “economy” (53%) and on “budget and spending” (59%), as well as a plurality disapproving of his performance on “jobs” (49%) and on “taxes” (50%). On the fiscal issues that dominate the concerns of the electorate, the President is clearly failing to meet the expectations of voters.

In fact, on all the fiscal issues tested about the President’s job approval, the intensity level (those who strongly approve to those who strongly disapprove) is dramatically against the President. On the economy, the President is upside down 1.9-to-1 between those who strongly disapprove (44%) to those who strongly approve (23%). On budget and spending, the President faces a 2.7-to-1 deficit between those who strongly disapprove (48%) and those who strongly approve (18%). On jobs, the deficit facing the President is 1.5-to-1 between those who strongly disapprove (40%) and those who strongly approve (26%). For taxes, the President is upside down at a 1.4-to-1 ratio between those who disapprove strongly (36%) and those who approve strongly (26%). Among those voters to whom these issues matter the most, the President is clearly losing the battle of ideas.

Indeed, while voters overall are split on the impact of President Obama’s economic policies – forty percent (40%) think they made the economy better, thirty nine percent (39%) think they made the economy worse, and nineteen percent (19%) think these

policies had no impact – this overall view is driven by partisan Democrats rallying behind the claims of the President. A majority (73%) of Republicans and a plurality of Independents (38%) believe that the President’s economic policies have made the economy worse. Both campaigns should take note of this metric, as it is one of the most predictive measures in the survey, especially with Independent voters. On the ballot, Romney is getting overwhelming support (91%) from those who believe Obama’s economic policies have made the economy worse while Obama is getting overwhelming support (91%) from those who believe these policies have made the economy better.

The real jump ball at the end of the campaign will be that nineteen percent (19%) of the electorate who feel that Barack Obama has had no impact on our Nation’s economy. Currently that group splits 46% for Mitt Romney and 44% for President Obama. If that group of voters break towards either the belief that Obama has made the economy better, or comes to the conclusion that he has made things worse, that’s when you will see the campaign break open -- much like it did in the final weeks of the 1980 presidential election when a similar group of voters came to the conclusion that they were not better off than four years earlier.

In sum, while all indications continue to point towards a close Presidential race, Mitt Romney begins the general election season in a very strong position for a challenger. Romney has already solidified base Republican voters and he faces an incumbent President who has failed to meet the expectations of a significant portion of the electorate on the dominate issue on voters’ minds – pocketbook issues. This race will see many ebbs and flows between now and Election Day (at this point in the 1980 election Ronald Reagan was behind Jimmy Carter by a full fifteen percentage points), but this data leaves no doubt that Mitt Romney is a credible candidate who is fully capable of defeating Barack Obama.