

## **Battleground 2014: Both Parties Are Down, but the GOP is Not Out**

By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber

This latest edition of the George Washington University Battleground Poll finds a national political environment that has gone from bad to worse. Nearly three-fourths of the American Electorate (73%) believes the country is on the wrong track, with sixty-two percent (62%) holding strong negative views about the direction of the country. More than eighty-five percent of voters disapprove of the job Congress is doing, including a majority of voters who strongly disapprove. More dramatically, for the first time a majority of voters disapprove of the job their Member of Congress is doing, leading a full fifty-eight percent (58%) of voters to the belief that it is time to give a new person a chance instead of their Member of Congress. A majority of voters disapprove of the job performance of President Obama, including forty-four percent (44%) of the electorate who strongly disapprove – and by a 1.45 to 1 strongly negative to strongly positive ratio. Every political entity tested – President Obama, the Republicans in Congress, the Democrats in Congress, and the Tea Party – has a majority unfavorable image.

Clearly, it is an ever-worsening political environment, and a lot has been written both before, during, and after the federal government shutdown about the plight of the Republicans in Congress and the Republican Party. What has been missed, in the focus on Republicans in Congress, however, is that for a large part of the American Electorate, especially Independent voters, they have come to much more of a “plague on both your houses” position, and in the process, the President’s image has taken a big hit. In fact, for the first time in our polling, the President has both majority unfavorable image and majority disapproval on his job rating. As has all too often happened to President’s in their second term, there are signs throughout this data that raise the very real prospect that Barrack Obama has lost the ability to lead this country. He can continue to search for political fights with equally unpopular figures, but he can no longer expect to implement major pieces of his agenda, and certainly will not be able regain the trust of the American people that he can turn around the direction of the country.

The President no longer has a reservoir of personal goodwill that he can use to turn around dissatisfaction about his job performance. His image is now more linked to his job performance,

rather than vice-versa, for the first time in his Presidency, and it goes far beyond just partisan Republicans. In fact, he has a majority unfavorable image and a majority disapproval rating with both Republicans and with Independents – with Independents holding a 2 to 1 negative view of President Obama’s job performance and a 36% favorable/60% unfavorable image rating. This cripples his ability to use the powers and visibility of the Presidency to move his agenda. Once a majority of voters both disapprove of the job the President is doing and have an unfavorable image of that President, over exposure of the President becomes much more of a tightrope for the message managers in the West Wing of the White House. (This is also one of the reasons that without the air cover of a re-election campaign, when most second term Presidential polling numbers go down, they never come back up.)

Even the political damage caused by the government shutdown – an event some pundits indicated might inflict long term catastrophic harm to the GOP – has already eased with the events of the past several weeks with the roll-out of Obamacare. Yes, voters blame the Republicans in Congress (50%) more than they blame President Obama and the Democrats in Congress (35%) for the shutdown. Among those who believe Republicans are to blame, a strong majority (58%) of these voters blame Tea Party supporters in Congress more than other Republicans in Congress (26%). However, it is wishful thinking on the part of Democrats that this has caused a split amongst Republican voters. Republicans have eighty-one percent (81%) support on the generic Congressional ballot among voters who self-identify as strong Tea Party supporters. This level of support is in line with the amount of support Republicans enjoy on the generic Congressional ballot from vote behavior Republicans (79%), very conservative voters (81%), and white conservative Christians (77%) – all this while gaining a six-point lead over the democrats on the generic ballot with Independent Voters.

On a broader level, just twenty-seven percent (27%) of voters indicate the shutdown made them less likely to vote for their Member of Congress versus twenty-one percent who indicate this incident made them more likely to vote for their Member of Congress. The plurality of voters (47%) indicates the shutdown will make no difference to their vote. This is a remarkable level of apathy for an event that ended just eleven days before we began fielding this survey.

Indeed, even another looming budget/debt ceiling crisis may not have a notable impact on voters. An overwhelming majority (82%) of voters say that they are aware the deal to end the shutdown ends on January 15<sup>th</sup>. However, a majority of voters (52%) say the use of this stopgap solution makes no difference to their Congressional vote.

In contrast, voters have a remarkable level of anxiety about two issues that the President owns – the national economy and Obamacare. While most voters are optimistic about their own personal economic situation, more than eight-in-ten voters rate the national economy as just fair (44%) or poor (42%). So, while many voters will be happy with their personal situation, they will always have a cloud of pocketbook anxiety hanging over them that will shape their views about any negative national economic news.

On Obamacare, a majority (53%) of voters oppose this law. In fact, there are more voters strongly opposed to it (44%) than there are total voters in favor of it (43%). One clear source of this frustration is the belief held by a plurality (49%) of voters who believe that this law went too far. Voters are also attuned to this issue – fully seventy-seven percent (77%) of them indicate they are aware of the rollout for Obamacare. A law with the President's name on it that is remarkably unpopular and has had an abysmal rollout along with a constant undercurrent of economic anxiety is not a winning formula for Democrats facing voters.

While the Democrats will be on defense on health care and on the economy, Republicans will be able to be on offense on the pocketbook issues that matter to voters. Even though Republicans in Congress are more disliked than Democrats are disliked, on an issue handling series, Republicans in Congress enjoy advantages over Congressional Democrats on handling the economy (+4%), taxes (+9%), and on the federal budget deficit (+12%). If the 2014 Elections turn on who will do a better job building a stronger economy and reining in a federal government from a tax and spend policy that gets in the way of that economy, then Republican candidates are headed to a better 2014 election than those who just focus on Party image would have us believe.

While it is true that by several traditional election measures – specifically Party image of Republicans in Congress and the soft re-election ballot – things may look bleak for Republicans,

we should be mindful of two things. First, the Republican Party now has an “unappeasable caucus”. Republicans in Congress do have a majority negative image rating. However, much of that low score is driven by Republicans, even devout ones, who are frustrated with the party. More than two-in-five Republicans have a negative view of the Republican Party. These voters will not abandon us when November 2014 arrives, but they are frustrated now with a party that is undergoing a very public debate about its future.

Second, despite these very public intra-party skirmishes, Republicans are still enthusiastic about voting in the 2014 Elections. On the vote likelihood screener, Republicans (71%) hold a seven point advantage over Democrats (64%) in being extremely likely to vote. In addition, despite the alleged toxic impact of the shutdown, Republicans only hold a three-point deficit on the overall generic ballot (44% Democrat/41% Republican), and actually hold a six-point lead with Independents on the generic ballot.

In sum, there are certain to be many twists and turns in the political world between now and November 2014, but the two political parties go into the 2014 Election year with both strengths and minuses and within the margin on the generic ballot. The Democrats will be facing the historical “six year itch” cycle with a President whose numbers fit the pattern for losing seats. He is surprisingly unpopular – both personally and in his job performance – considering the narrative he had coming out of the 2012 Election, and he faces an electorate that is anxious and skeptical about his policies on the issues that matter the most to them – health care and the national economy. In contrast, the Republicans have been through a public and sometimes uncivil debate about the future of the party and took the brunt of the blame for the longest government shutdown in over a decade and half. Despite these setbacks, Republicans have voters who are already highly motivated and have advantages on many of the fiscal issues that are certain to be top of mind for many, if not most, voters.