

Setting the Stage for 2012 – Shaping up to be Truman 1948 or Carter 1980?

While it is often said that twelve months can be a lifetime in politics, and traditionally the advantage tends to go to the incumbent in post WWII electoral politics, President Obama finds himself in a very deep hole a year out from the election and facing an even shorter timeframe to show real improvements to the American economy. The latest edition of the Politico-GW Battleground Poll finds the American Electorate remains primarily focused on the economy, jobs, and federal spending, and looks at nearly every issue through that economic lens.

What you will also find in this latest data is that even with the President aggressively campaigning for his "Jobs Plan" and against Congress almost non-stop over the last three months, voters' assessment of the President has not gotten any better, and in most cases has gone from bad to worse. With seventy-five percent (75%) of voters saying the country is off on the wrong track (the highest wrong track response in twenty years of the Battleground poll), and an overall job approval for the President that is net negative by eight-points – 44% approve and 52% disapprove (strongly disapprove now at a 1.5 to 1 ratio to strongly approve), this is going to be a tough re-election year for President Obama.

Shaping up to be like Truman in 1948 or Carter in 1980? Well, the comparisons to Carter are beginning to stack up. Starting with voters' bottom-line assessment of their presidencies. In November of 1979 Jimmy Carter's presidential job approval was 40% approve and 47% disapprove (Gallup Poll), a net seven-points negative and directly comparable to the 44% approve and 52% disapprove job approval of President Obama, which is a net eight-points negative. In that same timeframe of one year out from the election, every other president has been net positive (George W. Bush 52% favorable, Bill Clinton 53% favorable, George H.W. Bush 55% favorable, Ronald Reagan 53% favorable, Richard Nixon 49% favorable, John Kennedy 58% favorable, Dwight Eisenhower 78% favorable – from Gallup Poll presidential approval rankings).

In contrast, those pushing the narrative with comparisons to Harry Truman's re-election campaign in 1948 seem to be more driven by strategic necessity (some would say reality) than direct comparison, with the only direct comparison being that of an "anti-Congress." Yes, disapproval of Congress is at an all time high (11% approve and 83% disapprove), but what is ignored in that equation is that these same voters approve of the job "their Member of Congress" is doing (46% approve and 40% disapprove). To complicate this strategic necessity of the Obama campaign even further, of all the measurements that have gone from bad to worse, the performance measurement that has dramatically worsened is that of Obama dealing with Congress. In May, the President had a net positive rating in dealing with Congress – 49% approve and 44% disapprove. By the end of August, voters' approval of dealing with Congress had turned net negative by nine-points

– 42% approve and 51% disapprove. Today, after several months of playing out his Truman “do nothing” Congress message, Obama has dropped in voters’ assessment of his dealing with Congress, and is now twenty-points net negative – 38% approve and 58% disapprove. (With his worst ranking in those electoral “toss up” states that he must win for re-election, reaching a two-to-one net negative ratio).

From a polling perspective, the reality is that whether the next year ends up looking like the 1948 Truman reelection victory for President Obama and the Democrats, the 1980 re-election defeat of Jimmy Carter, or an election unique in and of itself, the current political environment is currently still tilted against Democrats (like the enthusiasm gap), and the stack of historical markers that Obama must break through (like high unemployment and low consumer confidence) is crowding out the horizon.

Not only does three-fourths of the American Electorate (75%) believe the country is going in the wrong direction (61% strongly), and a majority (52%) disapproves of the President (41% Strongly), sixty-seven percent (69%) of voters believe that the next generation will not do as well as they have. As much as President Obama would like to blame all his problems on the Congress, voters are increasingly focused on the failed solutions and give low marks of President Obama and his Administration.

While Obama is tied on a ballot test in a “generic Republican” matchup (44% Republican and 43% Obama) and holds a lead against Mitt Romney (43% Romney and 49% Obama), in the place where it really matters, in those “toss up” electoral states and with those voters who are extremely likely to vote, any advantage he has all but disappears. With the toss up electoral states, Obama trails the generic Republican on the ballot by 46% to 39%, and against Romney, is tied at 46%. With the 72% of voters who say they are “extremely likely” to vote, Obama trails the Generic Republican by six-points and Mitt Romney by three points, not breaking 45% on either of the two ballot tests.

At this point in the election cycle, however, the ballot is the least important of the measurements in looking at Obama’s reelection chances. Along with the President’s overall job approval, we tested how voters perceived how the President was doing in five areas: the economy, foreign policy, dealing with congress, the federal budget and spending, and jobs. Of the five, the President only receives positive marks on one – Foreign Affairs – at fifty-five percent approve and 39% disapprove (showing in fact the voters are willing to give credit where credit is due). The other four all received net negative reviews of the voters with the ratio of strongly disapprove over strongly approve running extremely high. With the economy, voters disapprove of Obama handling the issue by 62% to 36% (3.1 to 1 strongly disapprove), on his handling of the federal deficit 64% disapprove and 33% approve (3 to 1 strongly disapprove), on his signature issue of jobs, voters disapprove by a 58% to 40% margin (2.4 to 1 strongly disapprove), and on dealing with congress 58% disapprove and 38% approve (2.3 to 1 Strongly

disapprove). As importantly, to the long-range prospects of re-election, Obama's disapproval in the "toss up" electoral states is two-to-one on every one of the specific job approval measurements except jobs (which is still upside down by 62% disapprove – 36% approve).

Bottom line is these negative job performance perceptions are deeply seated with the overwhelming majority of the American public outside of the country's base democrat vote. Will the political environment and reelection prospects of President Obama end up like Truman of 1948 or that of Carter in 1980? Well, it's going to be an interesting year! The one thing you see throughout the data, is the American Electorate is quickly coming to the conclusion that the future of our country may depend on its outcome.

The Super Committee – Failure Should Not Be A Option

In this latest Battleground Poll we also examined the work of the so-called "Super Committee" that has been tasked with finding a way to reduce the federal budget deficit by \$1.5 trillion. At the outset, we should note that while much of the political class has been consumed with internal workings of all aspects of this committee, a majority of voters indicate they are not at all familiar with the work of this committee.

Instead of arguing about commas and decimal points, we should be explaining to voters the purpose of this committee and the clear contrast in how each party views this committee. Republicans wanted this committee to succeed and appointed thoughtful legislators who have both an expertise on the budget and a reputation for finding common ground. Representatives Camp, Upton, and Chairman Hensarling are all known as dealmakers and consensus seekers in the House. Among the Senate appointees, no one could doubt the expertise or willingness to find solutions of Senators Portman and Kyl while Senator Toomey could bridge the gap between his former and current colleagues. In contrast, the Democrats appointed the chairman of their Senate Campaign Committee (Senator Murray); their 2004 Presidential nominee (Senator Kerry); the former chairman of their House Campaign Committee (Representative Van Hollen); and a member that *National Journal* gave an 84% liberal voting record on economic issues in 2010 (Representative Clyburn). If this committee deadlocks, it will be because Democratic leaders in Congress appointed members who were unwilling to put fiscal security ahead of political opportunism.

Indeed, even without this background, a strong majority of voters (69%) believe that this committee is going to fail to devise a plan to cut the deficit by \$1.5 billion. However, voters want this committee to succeed with a majority (57%) of voters saying they would even support budget cuts that affected them personally.

Despite voicing these good intentions, most voters do not like any of the possible solutions that the committee could devise. Majorities of voters are extremely or very concerned about both across the board cuts to domestic programs as well as

across the board cuts to defense programs that would come from sequestration if the Super Committee comes up short. So, voters are anxious about the “punting” solution of just making blind cuts across all programs.

However, voters are equally unenthusiastic about some of the specific solutions that the committee is reported to be considering. Increasing beneficiary costs for Medicare and Medicaid, cutting defense spending, and making adjustments to Social Security are all met with majority opposition from voters. In fact, the reported proposals that have the highest level of support – tax reform, cutting the federal workforce and its benefits, and increased taxes on the rich and corporations – are also the ones in which most voters would not experience immediate fiscal pain. One of the most telling signs that most voters do not yet fully grasp the need for a significant adjustment to the federal budget is the tepid support (47% favor) for cuts to farm subsidies, which are often held up as an example of egregious government waste.

Based on this data, our best political counsel to the super committee members would be to be bold. The bottom line is the Super Committee will be damned if they do and damned if they don't, so they might as well set aside political maneuvering and do what's right for the future of the country. They should propose the largest budget cuts possible, the boldest entitlement reforms possible, and the most extensive tax reform possible. Voters are already cynical about the work of this committee and they do not have great fondness for any of the possible viable solutions. This is a case where voters are going to be frustrated and disappointed no matter what comes out of this committee, so its members might as well absorb this criticism while also taking a significant step towards getting the federal government back on a financially sound path.