

The Battleground 2011

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Democratic Strategic Analysis:

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Just under a year out from the 2012 Presidential election, the path to victory for Democrats is looking eminently clearer and more navigable. The presence of a burgeoning popular protest movement focused on economic inequality in the United States and the outsize influence of Wall St., along with voters' sound rejection of the socially conservative and pro-corporate/Tea Party agenda at the polls last week, provide President Barack Obama and the Democrats with some welcome wind at their backs. Voters handed devastating blows to a range of Right-wing measures, previewing the consequences in store for politicians who would ignore the American people's priorities and instead pursue a narrow agenda that overreaches and would only exacerbate the country's ills. Last Tuesday's results also underscore the power of an organized, engaged electorate, united around a common message—a model Democrats will be looking to replicate for 2012. While dissatisfaction with both Parties is high, Democrats face the next twelve months with several important advantages, including early leads in the Presidential trial heats, an electorate far more focused on jobs and the economy than the deficit, and an opposition Party that is defined in roughly equal parts by the base's displeasure with its potential Presidential nominees, and the broader electorate's withering assessment of the GOP's control of Congress. Democrats also have a winning message—a plan for jobs and to protect Social Security and Medicare.

In head-to-head matchups, President Obama leads both Mitt Romney (48% Obama to 43% Romney) and Herman Cain (49% Obama to 40% Cain) by sound margins and noticeable leads in intensity of support. Roughly 80% of Obama's support in both trial heats is derived from voters who say they are definitely going to vote for him. More encouragingly, independents' appetite for either of the current Republican frontrunners is limited. Independents support Obama 47% to 34% over Romney—Romney being the candidate a 48% plurality of Republicans believes will win the nomination. Moreover, a majority of independents supports Obama over Cain (51% to 27%), who, in spite of the perceived inevitability of an eventual Romney nomination, is the narrow first choice of the crowded Republican field. Obama not only wins over swing independents, but consolidates his partisan base as well, with 87% of Democrats supporting him against both Romney and Cain, while 83% of Republicans support Romney and only 79% of Republicans support Cain in matchups against Obama. Obama is also performing unusually well among seniors, a group that has proved elusive to him in the past. He bests Romney by 2 points (47% to 45%) and Cain by 12 points (48% to 36%) among seniors nationwide, despite having lost them by 8 points in 2008.

The tied vote Democrats have with Republicans—a one-point advantage—on the generic Congressional trial heat since May has held (44% to 43%) over the past six months. However, while the topline dynamics may appear static, there has been considerable movement underneath—particularly among independents. In September, independent voters leaned toward the GOP (29% to 26%), with a 45% plurality undecided. Today, Democrats have a decisive 9-point advantage over the GOP among independents (35% to 26%), with another 39% undecided. The Republican wave that characterized 2010 and provided a specious rationale for the pursuit of a pro-corporate/Tea Party agenda is washed up, providing Democrats with an opportunity to take back the House. However, the GOP currently has a narrow advantage when it comes to the consolidation of its partisans, with 90% of Republicans supporting the Republican candidate compared to 85% of Democrats supporting the Democrat. While Democrats need to win over the plurality of undecided independents, they must be careful not to sacrifice the support of their base in the process. In fact, building enthusiasm among Democrats needs to be a primary imperative, particularly as the enthusiasm gap has reappeared: 79% of Republicans and 77% of independents are extremely likely to vote, compared to only 65% of Democrats. That includes only 66% of young voters, 58% of African Americans, and 65% of single voters.

The mood of the electorate remains grim with fully three-quarters of voters feeling that things have gotten off on the wrong track, including 61% who feel this way strongly. Pessimism transcends partisan divides with majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans all believing that the country is headed down the wrong path. While few groups are optimistic about the direction of the country, younger voters; liberals; union households; Hispanics; and white, blue-collar women—all constituencies Democrats cannot afford to lose—believe that the country is on the wrong track. However, as we saw with the results of last week's elections, the aggressiveness of the GOP agenda lays bare the false claim that 2012 is a referendum on the President rather than a choice between two starkly different visions for the country. Democrats need to continue to clearly lay out the alternative.

Part of putting Democrats in better stead begins with an unwavering focus on voters' top priority—jobs and the economy (39%). Voters who choose jobs and the economy as their top concern afford Democrats larger than average advantages in both the Congressional and Presidential contests, and vote for Obama over Romney (50% to 40%).

Though government spending (19%) is a distant, second-tier concern that has remained largely unchanged since May, Democrats' superior approach on this issue, coupled with the looming deadline facing the "super committee", offers yet another key economic contrast between the two parties. Democrats' prescription for fixing the budget deficit is a far more palatable medicine to the public. Unsurprisingly, proposals to balance the budget that center on closing tax loopholes and reforming the tax code to make it fairer and increasing taxes on wealthy Americans and corporations are the most strongly

avored (72% strongly favor, 52% strongly favor, respectively). Proposals that would cut defense spending, Medicare and Medicaid, and Social Security are all opposed by majorities of voters, though a solid 55% majority says that the worst possible items to cut are Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security. A whopping 71% say they are very concerned about cuts to domestic spending like Social Security and Medicare, including 47% who are extremely concerned. These principles should serve as neon dividing lines; to cede these principles and countenance further cuts to the social safety net in the midst of an ailing economy would not only be disastrous for the country, but would greatly imperil Democrats' political fortunes. Further, allowing spending to eclipse attention to—and action on—creating jobs and the turning the economy around would be a critical misstep.

Democrats must embed their plans for the country in an agenda to rebuild the middle and working classes. Today, a majority of voters considers themselves middle class (52%) and nearly another quarter (23%) calls themselves working class. Interestingly, these classifications are not rooted in educational attainment, as two-thirds of college graduates consider themselves middle class today. A mere 4% of voters consider themselves upper class. These trends, along with voters' aforementioned support for increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporations, underscore the wisdom in framing arguments for job creation and greater economic equality in populist terms. Democrats favor an economy that works for all Americans, not just the big banks and CEOs.

It bears recognition that outside the beltway bubble, the machinations of the “super committee” are largely unfamiliar to voters, as fully half say they are not at all familiar with its work. Voters' cynicism toward Congress, however, leads nearly seven in ten (69%) to believe that the “super committee” will not achieve its goal. Voters are willing to tolerate cuts that directly affect them, but Congress should heed the public's warning about cuts to domestic programs like Social Security and Medicare. A solid majority (55%) opposes changes to the COLA, including pluralities of every age group.

The dangers facing Congress are real if they fail to produce a recommendation and a recommendation that speaks to voters' concerns. Nearly three-quarters (73%) strongly disapprove of the job Congress is doing, and while affect and perception of voters' individual member of Congress is somewhat better, less than a majority approves of the job their current member of Congress is doing.

Finally, the window to recast voters' perception of both the President's and Democrats' handling of the economy remains open. Republicans' zeal to pursue a self-serving agenda of overreach for themselves, prosperity for their wealthy contributors, and austerity for others, presents an opportunity for Democrats to seize the initiative and drive key contrasts between the two Parties. To do so, however, will require aggressive policy action and a determination not to sacrifice the Party's principles for a deal that may be both economically and politically devastating.