

The Battleground 2009

December 2009

Democratic Strategic Analysis:

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, Mark Keida, and Jason Kravitz

As the sun sets on the President's first year in office and he prepares to deliver his State of the Union address next month, he and his Party will be able to point to a host of achievements, not the least of which is rescuing the nation from an economic freefall. And yet, Obama and the Democrats will ultimately be judged on a success that has thus far eluded them: putting Americans back to work. While the President can rightly argue that Democratic efforts prevented a far more harrowing economic scenario, the public remains exceedingly anxious for tangible improvements on the economy that show up on Main Street, not just Wall Street—and in jobs, not just bonuses. Once again, the economy is shaping up as the defining issue not only of Obama's presidency, but for candidates running for office in 2010.

While voters still give the President the benefit of the doubt, and trust him far more than the GOP, the economy is becoming a drag on his—and especially his Party's—public image. Democrats and Republicans in Congress now have nearly identical, net-unfavorable ratings. The President is personally well-regarded, but his job performance rating has slid in recent months to the critical threshold of 50%. This could have enormous consequences for House Democrats running next year, as presidents with a job rating below 50% have lost an average of 41 House seats in mid-term elections since 1962. Despite owning advantages over the GOP on key issues (the economy) and dimensions of leadership (trustworthiness), for the first time in several years, the Republican candidate leads the Democratic candidate in the generic Congressional ballot (42% to 40%, with 18% undecided). While these numbers are bouncing around day-to-day (especially among independents), the Party's economic profile is key to solidifying an advantage.

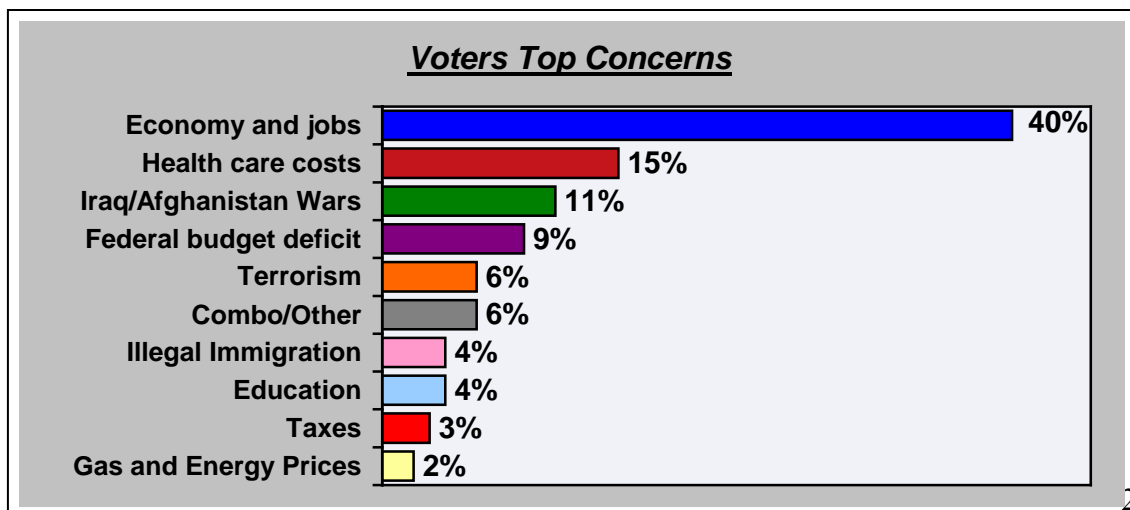
The Democrats' fate in 2010 will be determined largely by their ability to reconcile and overcome several interrelated challenges. The midterm electorate already promises to be less accessible to the Democrats. Now, this problem is compounded by diminished enthusiasm among even likely Democratic voters to show up and vote. In addition, they must reverse the defection of independent voters, who are becoming increasingly doubtful about Democrats' ability to repair the economy. Democrats must also be prepared to sell the health care reform bill to skeptical independents and seniors. Ultimately, President Obama is the glue holding it all together. In the coming months he must set the tone by demonstrating persuasively and visibly how the Democratic agenda on the economy, health care, and clean energy is actually putting America's families on a more prosperous course.

POLITICAL CONTEXT – AMERICANS ANXIOUS, IMPATIENT FOR TANGIBLE RESULTS ON THE ECONOMY

Just shy of one full year into President Obama’s first term, Americans are mixed in their outlook for the country’s future, but decidedly anxious about the near-term and growing impatient for tangible improvements on the economy. Only one-third (34%) say things in the country are going in the right direction, compared to 57% who think things have gotten off on the wrong track. This measure is down slightly from our July Battleground survey (38% right direction, 51% wrong track)—though with stubbornly high unemployment, Americans’ viewpoint is remarkably more upbeat than it was at the end of Bush’s second term (18% right direction, 75% wrong track). **There is a sharp partisan divide on this question, with nearly two-thirds (64%) of Democrats saying the country is headed in the “right direction,” compared to just 22% of independents and 8% of Republicans who feel similarly.**

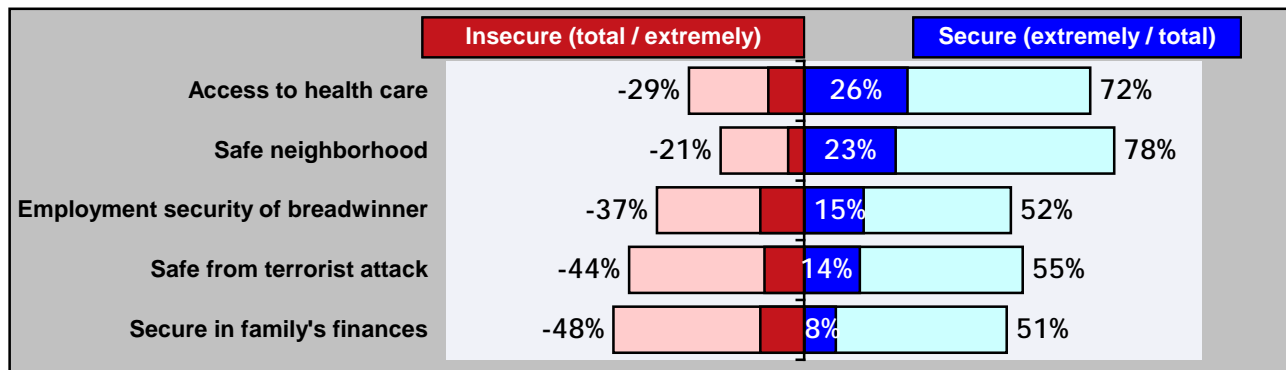
When asked how they are *feeling* about the way things are going, voters are divided: 51% are negative and 46% are positive. Twenty-seven percent describe themselves as “hopeful” and another 15% say they are “optimistic.” These positive descriptors are matched by more negative sentiments, with many voters describing themselves as either “angry” (20%), “pessimistic” (12%), “anxious” (11%) or “depressed” (8%). The defining sentiment among Democrats is hope (44%), while independents (26%) and Republicans (33%) are most likely to say they are angry.

Across the country, the economy and jobs continue to dominate the issue environment. Four-in-ten say the economy is the most important issue for Congress to address (40%, up from 36% in July), followed by health care costs (15%), and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (11%). No other issue rises to double digits. Concern over the economy and jobs crosses all major partisan and demographic divides, registering as the top issue among Democrats (39%), independents (48%), and Republicans (38%). Undecided voters (on the Congressional trial heat) are looking especially for solutions on the economy (46%).



While key metrics of public opinion on the economy have improved, the picture remains sobering. Thirty-nine percent of voters say the economy is on the rebound (up 13-points from 26% in July), compared to 60% who say the economy is turning downward, including 48% who say we are in a depression or a recession. Virtually unchanged from July, however, a majority (52%) indicate their personal economic situation is “just fair” (38%) or “poor” (13%). Another 41% say their personal financial situation is “good” and just 7% describe it as “excellent”. This recession has hurt voters personally, but the recovery has not yet helped them. A whopping 65% of voters have either been out of work themselves or know someone who has lost his/her job over the past year, an increase from 60% in July. One-third of voters have lost their health insurance or know someone who has.

Americans’ economic insecurity stands in sharp relief when compared to other fundamental areas of their lives. Feelings of personal security are highest when it comes to having access to health care, including emergency room care (26% extremely secure, 46% very secure) and neighborhood safety (23%, 55%)—though even on these fronts, just one-quarter or less describe themselves as “extremely secure.” Smaller numbers say they feel secure about the employment status of their household’s breadwinner (15%, 37%) or about being safe from a terrorist attack (14%, 41%). Notably, voters are split on whether they feel secure about their family’s finances in the coming year (8%, 43%).



National efforts to stimulate the economy draw mixed reviews. Four-in-ten say President Obama’s economic stimulus is working (10% strongly), compared to 55% who say it is not (42% strongly). When framed as “Congress’ stimulus package”, the number who say the plan is working drops to one-third (9% strong), while fully 62% think it is not living up to the billing (42% strongly). Notably, the intensity of opinion is decidedly on the side of those who think the economic recovery package is not delivering on its promises. Democrats anchor the positive view (70% say “the stimulus is working”), while independents (31%) and Republicans (10%) drive the opposing view. Underscoring the challenges for Democrats running in 2010: 63% of undecided voters think President Obama’s stimulus package is not working, just 31% believe it is. When framed as Congress’ stimulus package, 65% of undecideds think it is not working, compared to just 29% who believe it is.

IMAGES OF THE PLAYERS – OBAMA REMAINS POPULAR, BUT ALL POLS TAKING A HIT

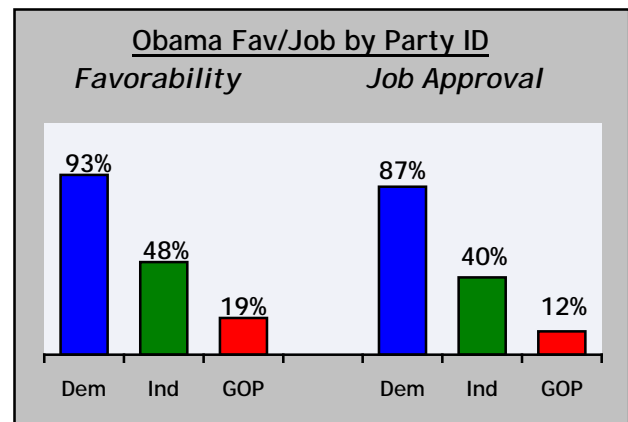
While the President and Vice President remain quite popular—an achievement in its own right, given the circumstances—the recession is weighing heavily on voters’ minds and the public’s eroding confidence could have serious repercussions for the balance of power in Washington, and the President’s agenda in the second half of his term.

Despite the growing meme that the public is turning against the President, fully 57% of voters have a favorable opinion of him, including 40% who have a strongly favorable opinion. Four-in-ten have an unfavorable view of Obama, including 31% who are strongly unfavorable. Obama’s image is solidly positive among undecided voters (58% favorable, 36% unfavorable), as well as among seniors, a group that proved elusive for him (52%, 44%)—and older women even more so (58%, 38%). Asked another way, two-thirds of voters (67%) “personally approve” of the President (48% strongly), compared to just one-in-five (24%) who disapprove (20% strongly). While independents are more polarized in their affect (48% favorable, 46% unfavorable), a solid majority personally approves of the President (58% approve, 28% disapprove).

Their personal affection for the President notwithstanding, voters have grown more critical of Obama’s job performance. Fifty percent of voters now approve of the job the President is doing, while 45% disapprove. In the last poll we conducted in July, 53% of voters approved of the job the President was doing and 42% disapproved.

The electorate has grown quite polarized on this key measure, with more than three-quarters of voters either approving strongly (37%) or disapproving strongly (41%) of the job he is doing. Undecided voters on the Congressional ballot are divided on the President’s job (43% approve, 44% disapprove, and 13% are unsure), but they are much more critical of Congress (13% approve, 77% disapprove, and 10% are unsure).

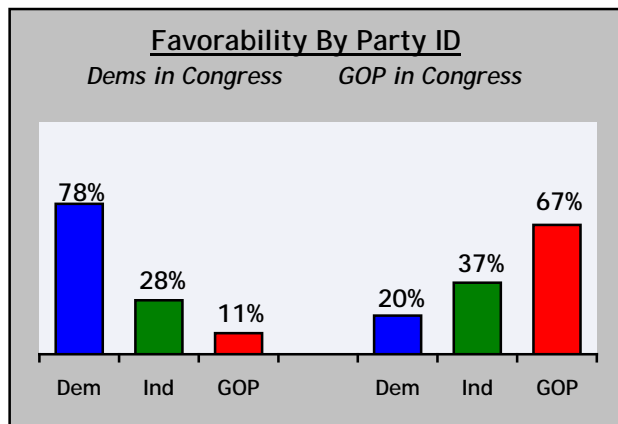
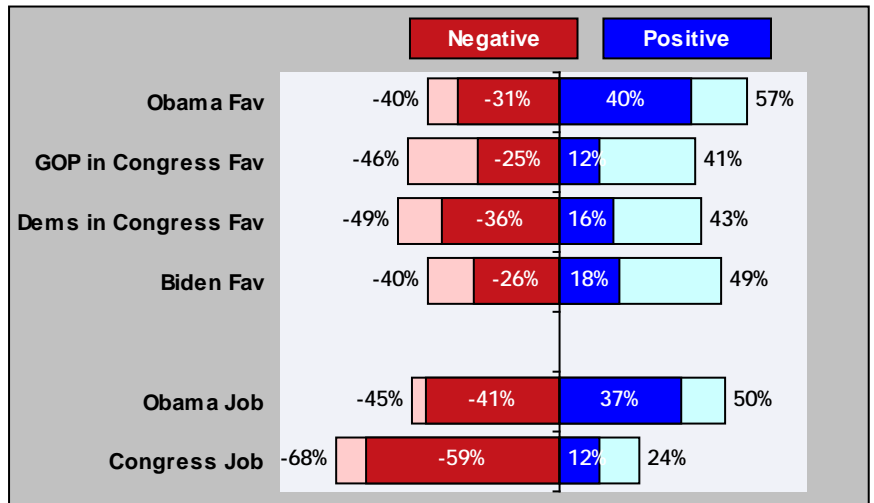
Obama’s strongest supporters during the campaign remain solidly on his side. He garners commanding job performance marks from African Americans (+84 net rating), Democrats (+79), liberals (+72), Latinos (+47), voters under 35 (+19), voters in the Northeast (+17), and women (+15)—especially among younger women (+30). **Approval of Obama is high among voters whose top issue is the economy (+10), health care costs (+45), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (+31), and education (+53).** Obama boasts net-negative ratings among voters who cite the federal budget deficit (-47), terrorism (-41), illegal immigration (-64), and taxes (-61) as the most pressing issues facing the country.



Over the last five months, Obama's job performance ratings have ebbed among several key demographic groups. The President's major task remains convincing swing voters of his ability to lead the country out of such challenging times. While undecided voters are effectively split (43% approve, 44% disapprove), independents are net negative in their ratings of his job performance (40% approve, 51% disapprove).¹ This is down slightly among independents from July (42% approve, 50% disapprove).

Vice President Joe Biden's personal image is positive as well, and he remains a key asset for target constituencies. Nearly half of voters (49%) have a favorable impression of the VPOTUS (18% strong), compared to 40% who are unfavorable in their assessment (26% strong). Biden is especially well liked among blue-collar women (+19 favorable), and in states with unemployment above 10% (+13).

Voters have mixed views of government. They have slightly warmer impressions of state government (48% favorable, 43% unfavorable) compared to the federal government (46% favorable, 48% unfavorable). They reserve their harshest criticism for Congress however. More than two-thirds disapprove of the job Congress is doing (68% disapprove, including 59% who strongly disapprove). Just under one-quarter approve of the job Congress is doing (24%, including 12% who strongly approve). Voters of all partisan stripes are critical of Congress, with Republicans (8% approve, 87% disapprove) and independents (15%, 77%) more negative than Democrats (43%, 47%).



¹ It is important to note that independents in this poll supported McCain by 1 point (versus an 8-point advantage for Obama on Election Day) and two-thirds identify as conservative (24% liberal, 9% moderate).

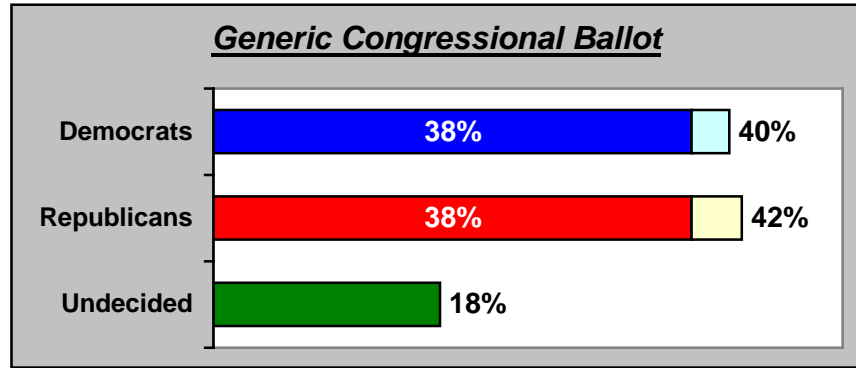
Voters' contempt for Congress extends to both Parties. Whereas voters had more favorable impressions of Congressional Democrats than Republicans in July, today they hold both in nearly similar disdain. Democrats (43% favorable, 49% unfavorable) and Republicans (41%, 46%) both have more detractors than supporters. And while Democrats have warmer impressions of their Party (78% favorable) than Republicans do of theirs (67% favorable), independents (who tend to be especially conservative in this poll) give Republicans the edge (-8 net unfavorable for Republicans compared to -26 for Democrats). Majorities of undecided voters in the Congressional race rate both Parties especially negatively (Republicans in Congress: 28% favorable, 51% unfavorable; Democrats in Congress: 29% favorable, 53% unfavorable).

The images of key Democratic leaders are noticeably softer than the President's. Roughly three-in-ten voters view Speaker Pelosi favorably (29% favorable, 12% very favorable) and more than half view her unfavorably (54% unfavorable, 44% very unfavorable). Nearly half (46%) have no substantive opinion of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Of those with an opinion of Reid, 18% percent view him favorably and just over one-third view him unfavorably (36%).

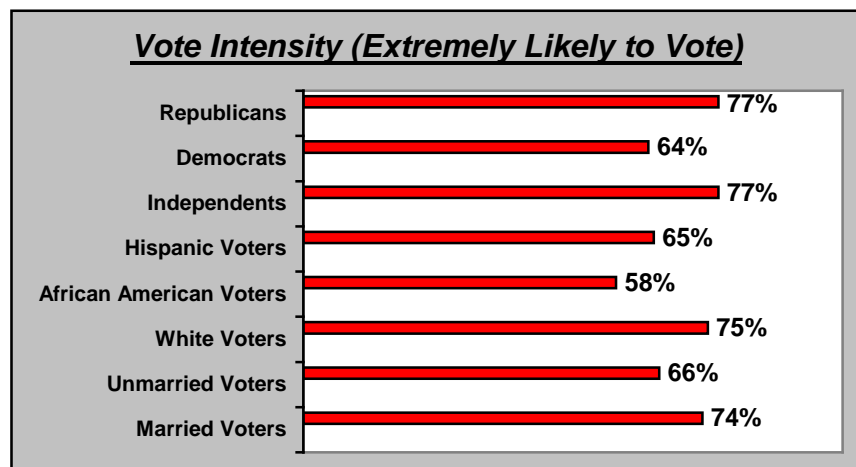
With the Democrats controlling both the Executive and Legislative branches of government, the Republicans have ample political targets. Yet the Republicans are struggling to reclaim their identity and have not yet settled on a standard bearer to deliver their message. Sarah Palin presents a difficult choice for the GOP: she is prone to taking the offensive, yet her image is highly polarized, with the intensity of public opinion stacked against her. Forty-five percent have a favorable view of Palin (24% very favorable) compared to 46% who are unfavorable (35% very unfavorable). Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich is not much of an alternative, with 43% of voters favorable toward him (15% very favorable) and 36% unfavorable (23% very unfavorable).

THE RACE FOR CONGRESS – TIED AT HALFTIME, GOP GAINING MOMENTUM

The political environment for Democrats running in 2010 is becoming increasingly more treacherous. For the first time in several years, the generic Republican leads the generic Democrat in the Congressional horse race—albeit within the margin of error (42% to 40%, with 18% undecided). This is down from 43% to 40% in favor of the Democrats (also within the margin of error) in our last installment of Battleground, and consistent with most recent public polls which show swings back and forth.



The gap in enthusiasm between the two parties at this early stage is the most striking dynamic framing the 2010 cycle. Just under two-thirds (64%) of Democrats say they are “extremely likely” to vote in the upcoming elections, compared to 77% of Republicans and independents. Looking at it another way, the ballot among those who say they are “extremely likely” to vote favors the Republican by 10 points (47% to 37%, with 16% undecided). This differential, along with the fact that the 2010 electorate will be older and less racially diverse, spells trouble for the Democrats.



Notwithstanding the fact that the independents in this sample are very conservative, it is clear the Democrats have an “independents” problem on their hands. Independents are fickle; they were essential to Barack Obama’s success in 2008, especially in key battlegrounds like Ohio and Florida, yet currently, independents prefer the Republican candidate by 21 points (40% to 19%, with 40% undecided). This is down from an 11-point gap in our last Battleground poll (33% to 22%) and a 1-point gap in 2008 (33% to 32%).

The gender gap remains alive and well, though it now favors the GOP. Republicans are leading by 11 points among men, while the Democrats are leading among women by just 6 points. Democrats should expect to lose men—they usually do—but they will have a very difficult time holding seats if they cannot achieve wider

advantages (at least 9 points) among women. Older women are only 2 points net-Democratic, and married women are 15 points net-Republican. These are two high-turnout constituencies that could be problematic for Democrats.

The Republicans derive their ballot strength from traditional base constituencies, including from voters in the South (45%) and in the suburbs (45%), men (46%), Whites (50%), White seniors (48%), conservatives (60%), college-educated men (51%), married voters (49%), regular church-goers (48%), and among those who are most concerned about the “federal budget deficit” (69%), “terrorism and homeland security” (64%), “illegal immigration” (62%), and “taxes” (70%). Republicans also perform well with voters ages 45-59 (46%), and among the majority who think the country is headed off on the wrong track (66%).

The Democrats’ base is comprised of voters in the Northeast (44%), Midwest (43%) and in urban areas (51%), along with women (44%), voters under 45 (49%), African Americans (90%), Hispanics (51%, for a 20-point gap), “non-White” seniors (46%), liberals (74%), single voters (65%), voters who are no longer married (46%), college-educated women (45%), union households (50%), and among voters who think the country is headed in the right direction (80%). Notably, the Democrats lead among the large plurality who cite the “economy and jobs” as the most pressing concerns facing the nation (42% to 39% for the GOP), as well as “health care costs” (62% support the Democrat), the “wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (52% to 32%), and “education” (62%). **Democrats must work to increase turnout, especially among younger voters, unmarried voters and voters of color.**

The most obvious battleground in 2010 will be undecided voters, who currently comprise 18% of the electorate. **The profile** of the undecided vote reveals opportunities for both parties. It **skews toward women, voters over 45, conservatives, independents, 2008 Obama voters, non-union households, and Whites**. Specifically:

- 53% of undecided voters are women
- 77% are over the age of 45
- 63% do not have a 4-year college degree
- 63% are self-described conservatives (30% are liberals, and 7% are moderates)
- 48% are independents (28% are Democrats, and 25% are Republicans)
- 45% voted for Obama (30% voted for McCain)
- 43% usually vote for a Democrat (39% for the GOP, and 17% split ballots)
- 83% are in non-union households
- 65% attend church at least once a month
- 80% are White (9% are Hispanic, and 4% are African American)
- 57% have private health insurance (30% have “government” insurance)
- 88% say they are satisfied with their health care (10% are dissatisfied)

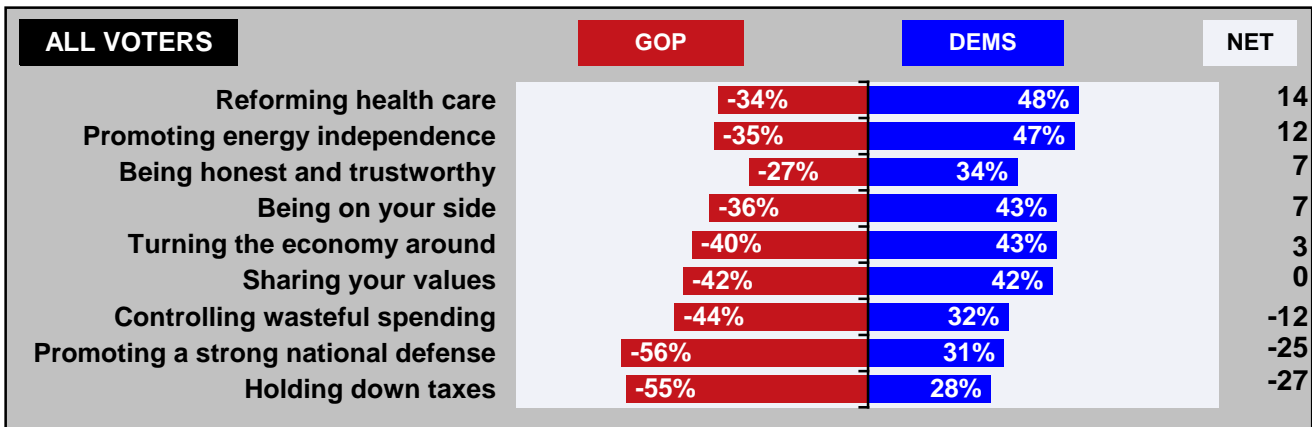
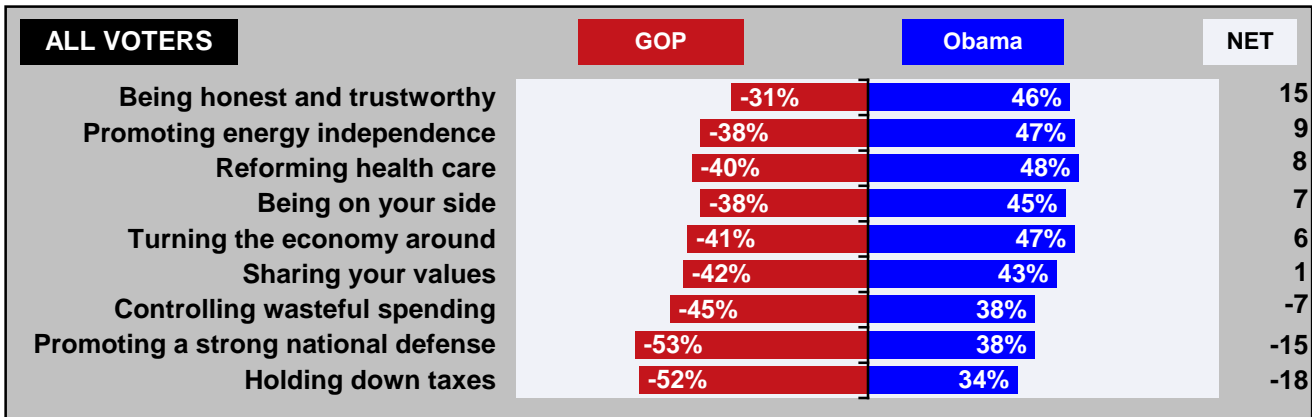
Voters' opinions on the balance of power in Washington are mixed. Forty-one percent like the idea of “divided government” while 38% prefer “unified government” (21% are unsure). Independents (50% divided, 24% unified, 25% unsure) and Republicans (54%, 29%, 17%) prefer divided government. Of concern for the Democratic Party, however, is the fact that only 53% of their own partisans would like to keep the status quo (26% divided, 21% unsure).

At this point, the GOP is poised to pick up seats. Since 1962, presidents with a job approval rating below 50% lose *on average* 41 House seats in the midterm elections. President Obama’s job performance rating currently stands at the threshold mark of 50%; the GOP needs to flip 41 House seats to regain control of the lower chamber. This is an ambitious goal when the average change is 28 seats, but Democrats will have to fight to keep their majority.

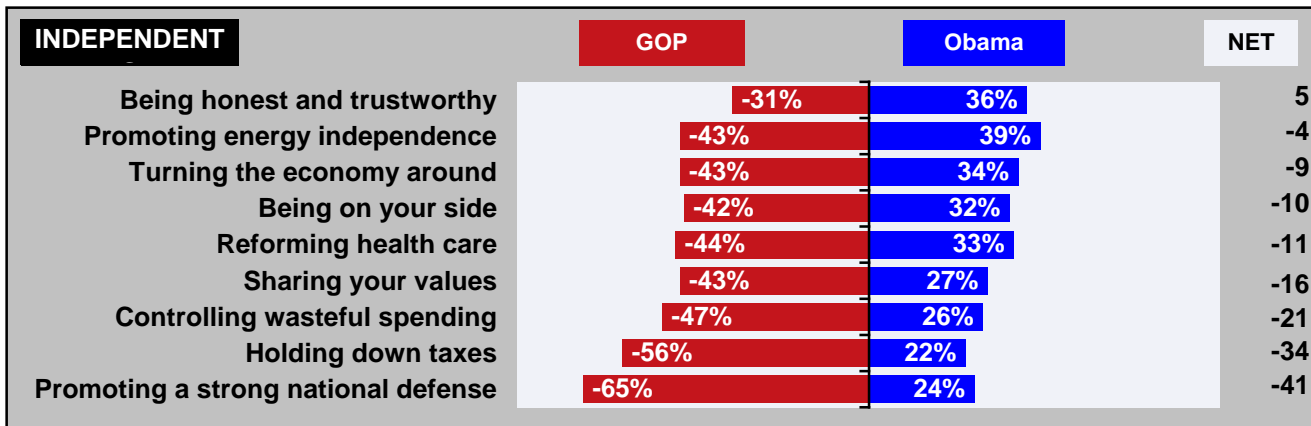
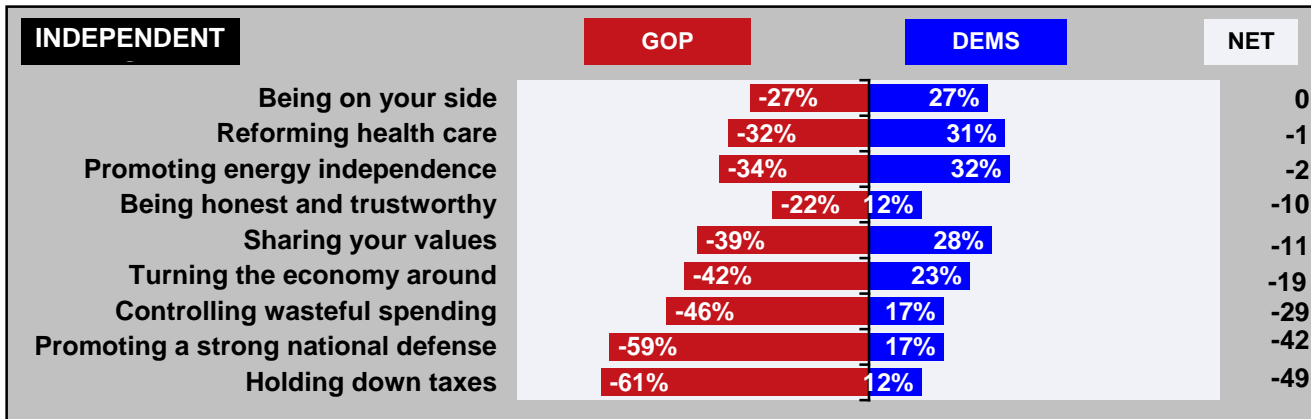
COMPARING THE PARTIES – TRADITIONAL PROFILES ARE EMERGING.
INDEPENDENTS LOSING FAITH IN THE DEMOCRATS. DEMOCRATS NEED STRONGER
PROFILES ON THE ECONOMY AND HEALTH CARE WITH SWING VOTERS

Overall, Americans trust the Democrats on key priorities, including on reforming health care, promoting energy independence, and improving education. Yet they are simultaneously wary of rising budget deficits, the national debt, and their own tax burden. This tension between voters’ anxiety over taxes and government spending and their desire for critical investments in the national economy will assuredly frame many of the races this November. As deficits loom for the foreseeable future—along with domestic challenges that require significant public investments—the challenge for Democrats will be to demonstrate more persuasively they are holding the culprits who caused the recession accountable for their actions, while their investments will help real families, not just banks and Wall Street.

President Obama (and to a lesser extent, his Party) retain advantages over the GOP on key issues, though the margins have decreased since our last Battleground. At the same time, the GOP has increased its edge on issues where it has traditionally enjoyed credibility. **Specifically, both Obama and the Democrats lead the GOP on “reforming health care”, “promoting energy independence”, “being honest and trustworthy”, “being on your side”, and on perhaps the most important metric: “turning the economy around”.** The Parties are effectively tied on “sharing your values”. The GOP holds advantages on “controlling wasteful spending”, “promoting a strong national defense” (despite the President’s escalation of troops in Afghanistan), and “holding down taxes”. Obama adds credibility to his rating on spending, taxes, defense, and honesty. The Party has more credibility on health care and energy independence. Both the President and the Party are about the same on the economy.



But the real story of the electoral challenges facing each Party is found in the opinions of independents on these measures. In short, independents are increasingly ambivalent—they are losing faith in the Democrats but are not quite sold on the GOP’s solutions. Both Parties must do a much better job of earning the trust of these and other swing voters. **Voters continue to place more faith in the President than the Democratic Party.** Among all voters, the Democrats lead the President outside the margin of error on only one issue: “reforming health care” (+6). Among independents,



the Democrats lead the President outside the margin of error on just three dimensions: “being on your side” (+10), “reforming health care” (+10), and “sharing your values” (+5). **The most noticeable drop-off is on the issue of health care, where the House has been more supportive of a public option and more aggressive in pushing for a vote on health care reform.**

ALL VOTERS	Obama - DEM	INDEPENDENTS	Obama - DEM
Promoting a strong national defense	+10	Holding down taxes	+15
Holding down taxes	+9	Being honest and trustworthy	+15
Being honest and trustworthy	+8	Turning the economy around	+10
Controlling wasteful spending	+5	Controlling wasteful spending	+8
Turning the economy around	+3	Promoting a strong national defense	+1
Sharing your values	+1	Promoting energy independence	-2
Being on your side	0	Sharing your values	-5
Promoting energy independence	-3	Reforming health care	-10
Reforming health care	-6	Being on your side	-10

The Democrats' challenge is both substantial and evident. In our last Battleground survey, Obama and the Democrats led the GOP among independents on roughly half of the issues and traits tested, including on the economy and health care. Today, the President leads on only one dimension ("being honest and trustworthy"), while his Party is either tied or loses on every front. Most problematic for the Democrats is the defection of independents on issues that comprise the core of the Democratic agenda: health care, energy independence, and the economy. On each of these issues, independents—who just months ago gave the Democrats double-digit advantages—now side with the GOP.

Moreover, the Congressional Democrats have more credibility than the President on health care and energy independence, while the President has more credibility on the economy, taxes, spending, and honesty. **Job number one for the Democrats right now is to pass health care reform and then sell it afterwards, especially to white seniors and independents. Job number two for the Democrats is to develop an economy and jobs package for Main Street. The President should lead this effort.**

THE DEMOCRATIC AGENDA – STRONG APPETITE FOR HEALTH CARE REFORM, BUT A MESSAGING CHALLENGE REMAINS FOR OBAMA AND THE DEMOCRATS

The Democrats approach the holiday recess with unfinished business on key fronts, including on health care reform and energy and climate legislation—two central planks of President Obama’s campaign platform—and most critically a new jobs bill. All Congressional efforts now appear focused on finalizing a health reform bill before the President gives his State of the Union address (or sooner)—and before legislators begin hitting the campaign trail in earnest. The Democrats know the next month may be the best—and likely last—opportunity to pass sweeping health care reform in a generation.

The Democrats’ efforts to reform health care are well-placed. The belief that the health care system needs significant reform is broad and deep. Nearly two-thirds (63%) believe either “major changes are needed for the current health care system” (49%) or “our current health system needs to be replaced with a new system” (14%). Twenty-nine percent think the system needs “minor changes” and 5% say the system needs no change. A majority (65%) of Democrats and a plurality (45%) of independents believe the system needs major change. Even 34% of Republicans want major change (another 51% want “minor change”).

In this context, advocates of reform must do more to associate opponents with the health and pharmaceutical industries, which continue to have dismal ratings (28% favorable and 64% unfavorable for health industries; 27% favorable and 62% unfavorable for pharmaceutical industries). Undecided voters in the Congressional race give these institutions wholly net negative ratings (health industries: 17% favorable, 73% unfavorable; pharmaceutical industries: 24% favorable, 63% unfavorable), as do independents (health industries: 25% favorable, 69% unfavorable; pharmaceutical industries: 29% favorable, 59% unfavorable).

Americans have multiple goals when it comes to health care reform, and there is a noticeable partisan divide on this question. Democrats are most likely to cite universal coverage as their top priority, independents and Republicans cite cost control, though these issues are, of course, intrinsically joined and there is overlap in the data on each. Overall, a plurality of voters (41%)—including 42% of those who have lost their health care or know someone who has—say cost control is the most important element of health care reform (48% of Republicans and independents, and 31% of Democrats think this). Twenty-eight percent believe providing all Americans with health coverage is a top priority. Nearly half (47%) of Democrats prioritize universal coverage, followed by 20% of independents and 13% of Republicans. Twenty-two percent say it is most important to improve the quality of health care services (30% of Republicans, 20% of independents, and 15% of Democrats think this).

Reflecting the challenges of passing a bi-partisan health care reform bill, many voters believe the President’s priorities on health reform are different from their own. Nearly two-thirds (63%)—including clear majorities across the political divide—think the President’s top priority is ensuring all Americans have health coverage. Few say his top priority is cost control (11%) or improved services (7%). In other words, and perhaps not surprisingly, he’s speaking more to his base than anyone else, and yet is somehow less of a standard on this issue than Democrats in Congress (liberals trust Congressional Democrats over Republicans on the issue of health care reform 84% to 5%, but trust Obama over Republicans on the issue 80% to 11%). **The central communications challenge for the Administration is convincing the public that reducing cost is inextricably linked to expanding coverage; and that both can be achieved without sacrificing quality. Congress must sell this once reform is passed, and any discussions of increases in costs and taxes must always be coupled with benefits.**

A related challenge for the Democrats is demonstrating that their plan will help individuals and their families who have insurance. While a clear plurality (49%) believes the country would benefit from the Democrats’ health care reforms (44% disagree), only 39% think these reforms will actually help them and their families (51% disagree). Forty-one percent of those who have lost their health care (or know someone who has) believe that they will personally benefit from health care reform. Solid majorities of Democrats think health care reform will help both the country (78%) and themselves (65%), while independents (36% and 31%) and Republicans (23% and 16%) are much more doubtful. Similarly, undecided voters in the Congressional race are mixed (47%, 32%). Even among people who have personally lost health care (or know someone who has) their orientation is to keep costs down, and their attitudes are not much different than Americans overall.

Still, it is becoming clear that the Democrats will pass a health reform bill (the details, particularly the fate of a public option or Medicare buy-in, are still unclear). **Less certain is the fate of other key legislation, such as a comprehensive energy and climate bill, where public support has evaporated over the past year.** Currently, opponents of so-called “cap and trade” legislation outnumber supporters by nearly two-to-one (41% to 22%, with 37% unsure). Majorities of Republicans (61%) and independents (51%) are opposed, and a plurality (43%) of Democrats are unsure (39% support, 18% oppose). With a tough election cycle shaping up for Democrats, it appears far less likely that the Democrats—particularly rank-and-file members—will push for final passage of a climate and energy bill next session unless this legislation is connected more explicitly and directly to job creation.