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The Explosive Republican-Obama Battleground

Medicare attacks and middle class agenda drives voters to Democrats

The latest Democracy Corps survey of the Republican House battleground confirms that 2012 will be an explosive year.¹ These Republicans swept into Washington on the tide of a change wave but are now facing what could be a change election with an even higher wave, and these seats are anything but secure. The difference from the last three elections is that this wave seems to be threatening everything in its path.

These battleground districts went for Obama by a 52 to 47 percent margin and for the incumbent Republican House members in 2010 by 54 to 43 percent. So, this is a real battleground and these districts represent a pretty good measure of the middle of the country, which has swung each election.

This is obviously not the best moment to judge the Democrats' eventual fortunes. Fewer voters now identify themselves as Democrats and the ones who do are less enthusiastic about the president. Obama's overall approval rating is down 7 points and he is losing independents in these districts. We do not yet know the public's reaction to the president's latest initiatives, but there is good reason to believe they can help him and improve the Democrats' position here.

Whatever else is happening on the Democratic side, the bigger story is the growing vulnerability of the incumbent House Republicans. The mood of the country is deeply pessimistic and voter anger encompasses the Republicans as well, particularly the new House members. This survey in these mostly Obama-2008 districts does not ask generic questions but asks about the incumbent members by name. Consider the following:

- Negative personal feelings about the incumbent members have jumped 10 points in their districts since March; disapproval of how he or she is handling the job has jumped 7 points.

¹ This memo is based on a unique survey of 1000 likely 2012 voters in 60 Republican battleground districts conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps September 14-19, 2011. Unless otherwise noted, margin of error=+/- 3.1% at 95% confidence.



- The percent saying they “can’t re-elect” is up 4 points to 49 percent – compared to just 40 percent who say they “will re-elect because the incumbent is doing a good job and addressing issues important to voters.” This is substantially worse than the position of Democratic incumbents two years ago.
- Among independents, disapproval of incumbent Republican House members jumped 12 points, and a large majority of independents (54 to 37 percent) say they “can’t vote to re-elect” the incumbent.
- There has been a 9-point rise in the number saying the incumbent will not work with both parties to get things done; a 6-point rise in the number saying their representative does not fight for people in the district.
- While the incumbent Republicans are at 50 percent in the named ballot, a slight improvement since March, the gains were produced almost entirely by consolidation of Republicans. They did not improve their vote position with independents.
- Attacks on the Republicans in this balanced survey have a dramatic impact on the position of these incumbents. After the attacks and messages—with Medicare figuring centrally—the race for Congress is dead even at 45 to 45 percent. One in ten voters shifts away from these vulnerable incumbents.

In this potentially explosive election year, most of these incumbents are exposed and could well be the victims of voter anger. None of us has seen a developing election year like this one. This survey provides an important map at a critical time – and offers key advice on enhancing Republican vulnerability and positioning Democrats.

- Three attacks on the Republicans stand out as particularly potent: Medicare, tax cuts for the wealthy and special interests while raising payroll taxes on the middle class and small businesses, and protecting congressional salaries in a government shutdown while voting to allow members of the military to have their salaries suspended.
- The content of the Obama jobs plan is popular and should be highlighted. Support only increases when the bill is described. The individual elements of the bill are extremely popular: ending Chinese currency manipulation to even the playing field for American manufacturers, creating an infrastructure bank, and reducing the payroll tax are among the most popular proposals; three quarters of all voters support these proposals.
- The plan and Democratic messages need to be situated in the need to build up the middle class after being under attack for decades.



On the Wrong Track

The political atmosphere is totally toxic. Three-quarters of these battleground voters think the country is on the wrong track—a 13-point jump in “wrong direction” since March. This is completely driven by the economy—on our thermometer scale, 80 percent give the state of the economy a cool, unfavorable rating (under 50 degrees). New Obama voters (youth, unmarried women and minority voters) have been hit especially hard in this economy. Since March, these voters report a net 27-point decline in their outlook for the direction of the country—a critical indicator about the country’s future.

This is an intensely anti-Washington, anti-incumbent moment. In this terrible climate, both President Obama and the Democrats have taken a big hit – though matched by the hit taken by Republicans as voters turn against Washington and establishment politicians. In our battleground, the president’s approval rating dropped 7 points—to 41 percent—since March. Over the same period, his personal positive ratings dropped 9 points. As a result, the President is losing the 2012 matchup to both Romney and Perry, and losing independents to Romney by 20 points. He also needs to raise his position with the new Obama voters – young people, minorities and unmarried women still struggling with the economy.

National polls show a small improvement in the President’s overall approval coming off of the launch of his jobs plan – and this survey shows strong support for the jobs plan when described and given context. The president can clearly regain ground.

In this survey, every Democratic leader, the party and Democrats in Congress have suffered about a 5-degree drop in their mean thermometer scores, evident in diminished ‘warm’ responses. Every Republican leader, the party and the Republican member has suffered a like fall, reflected in their rising ‘cool’ responses.

The mood is totally framed by dissatisfaction with the economy and Washington’s inability to make things better. The outlook in the battleground, indeed the country, is clear: this is an anti-politics, anti-Washington, and anti-party environment. It’s a good year not to be an incumbent.

Vulnerable Incumbents

These incumbent Republicans are in the front ranks in this battle with voter anger. In the process they have become better known since March—and the results are not good. Overall disapproval has increased 7 points; on our thermometer scale, cool (under 50) ratings have increased 10 points since March. Positive favorability ratings for these incumbents have remained relatively stable while negative ratings have surged.

These Republicans are in jeopardy. Fourteen months out from the election, nearly half (49 percent) of all voters in these Republican districts now say that they “can’t vote to reelect” their representatives. Half of all voters (51 percent) say, “the more I hear from my representative in Congress, the less I like.” That represents a 7-point increase since March.

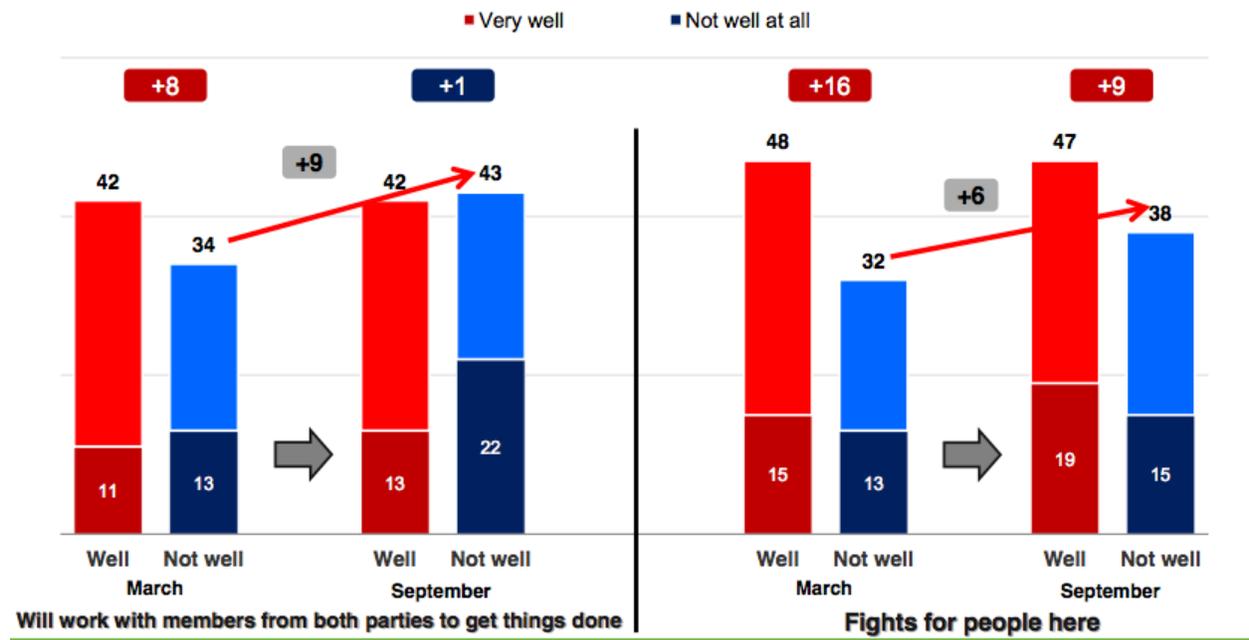


These incumbents have not improved their image on any attribute, though negative associations have jumped. There has been a 9-point rise in the percent saying the incumbent does not “work with members from both parties to get things done.” There has been a 6-point rise in voters saying their member does not “fight for people here.”

And on the big debate of the day on spending and deficits, just 40 percent on average in these districts think the incumbent “has the right approach to spending and deficits” with those saying the incumbent does not have the right approach up 7 points since March.

‘Not’ work with both parties up 9 points; ‘not’ a fighter for people here up 6

Now, I am going to read you a list of words and phrases which people use to describe political figures. For each word or phrase, please tell me whether it describes (HOUSE INCUMBENT) very well, well, not too well or not well at all.



Independents turn away from battleground Republican incumbents

Consolidation of the Republican base has put these incumbents at the 50 percent threshold on the vote and an improvement since March, but that is nothing to write home about. As incumbents in a change election, many of these members could still fall. The current vote is short of what these districts produced less than a year ago when the members won by 11 points (54-43.) In the 13 metropolitan House seats, the contest is statistically even and the next closest is the large



bloc of 28 suburban districts where the incumbent is at 50 percent. Not surprisingly, the rural districts pose the biggest challenge.

The incumbents are limited at the moment by the inhospitable welcome they are getting among independents. While these members raised their job rating among Republicans, they faced a sharp drop off with everybody else. Among independents, disapproval has surged 12 points in the last six months. More than half of all independents (56 percent) now say they “can’t vote to re-elect” their representatives—a striking 18-point jump since March.

The undecided are also poised to cast a protest vote. More than twice as many say they “can’t vote to re-elect” as say they “will vote to re-elect” the incumbent.

So with House incumbents mainly appealing to their base, Democratic challengers have lots of room to make gains among the new Obama voters who have been holding back and among independents who have reacted unfavorably to the incumbents’ performance in Washington. The shifts away from the Republican incumbent in the congressional ballot at the end of this survey suggest these targets of opportunity are very real.

The Debate that shifts the vote

The balanced debate and series of attacks and messages produced a pretty remarkable shift bringing the Congressional vote dead even — driven more by Medicare, the consequences of the Republican no-tax pledge, and Washington priorities than anything else. This debate has real consequences.

The Middle Class Moment

The jobs bill is a real plus for Democrats and represents a potential vulnerability for Republicans. Without description, voters are open to the plan—the un-described bill begins with 45 percent support, 41 percent opposed. An unbiased description of the elements of the jobs bill gains higher support—54 percent initially support the plan, 39 percent oppose it.

Support only increases when the bill is described. The individual elements of the bill are extremely popular: ending Chinese currency manipulation to even the playing field for American manufacturers, creating an infrastructure bank to finance rebuilding and modernization projects, and reducing the payroll tax are among the most popular proposals; three-quarters of all voters support these proposals.

However, each of the individual elements alone performs much better than the jobs bill as a whole. It is essential that Democrats not only describe the bill to their voters, but that they get the message right. A message framework centered around the long-term struggle to get back the economy for the middle class dominates the Republicans’ anti-spending, anti-tax message. But a short term Democratic framework is not nearly as powerful.



We tested two messages against the standard Republican “cut to grow” message. The Democrats’ long-term middle class framework outperforms the short-term/act now/post-partisan framework. The middle class message beats the Republican message by 17 points, while the post-partisan/act now message loses to the Republican line by 7 points.

It is crucial for Democrats to get this right—this could be the difference between widespread support for a jobs bill whose individual elements are popular and a rejection of the bill in favor of deficit reduction. The strongest supporters of the described bill are the new Obama voters—who apparently are ready to be rallied.

The middle class message states:

We need to rebuild the economy for the middle class that has been under attack for decades. We should cut payroll taxes by one thousand five hundred dollars for families and small businesses and give incentives to companies that hire returning veterans and the long-term unemployed. Get Americans back to work rebuilding our schools and installing new technology. Let's get back to an America where hard work and responsibility pays off.

Later we tested specific attacks and critical themes, but it is hard to understate the importance of a middle class framework for all this. The best attack message among both swing and base voters focused on middle class priorities.

(NOT FOR MIDDLE CLASS) The middle class can't catch a break. Gas prices, bills, and tuition go up but salaries and benefits remain stagnant. At a time when the middle class is suffering, (HOUSE INCUMBENT) cares more about keeping tax breaks for their corporate lobbyist friends than helping out the struggling middle class.

The middle class attack performs especially well in suburban districts (61 percent total serious doubts) and among independents (62 percent). It is also the strongest message to reach key swing voters: white seniors (74 percent), white non college-educated voters (66 percent), and voters who once supported but have now moved away from the President (89 percent). This message is also strong among key base voters: unmarried women (76 percent), women (69 percent), and minorities (66 percent).



Strongest Attacks to reach swing voters

Three attacks on the Republicans stand out as particularly potent: Medicare, tax cuts for the wealthy and special interests while raising payroll taxes on the middle class and small businesses, and protecting congressional salaries in a government shutdown while voting to allow members of the military to have their salaries suspended. The first two, in particular, scored well among key persuadable groups and popped in regression modeling as drivers of the shift in the vote. Two other attacks—protecting subsidies for big oil and cutting education—also resonated with voters. In regression analysis, the education message was shown to move voters to shift against the incumbent on the final ballot.

It is important to note that these messages all fit within the framework that our previous surveys have shown to be effective: they are all focused on long-term solutions to get the economy back for the middle class and move away from an economy that privileges the wealthiest and most-connected in Washington.

(MEDICARE) (HOUSE INCUMBENT) voted to end Medicare as we know it, forcing seniors to pay 6,400 dollars more out of pocket every year and buy insurance directly from the insurance companies.

(PAYROLL TAX CUT) (HOUSE INCUMBENT) voted to give even more tax breaks to big corporations and the wealthiest Americans, but now (he/she) wants to raise payroll taxes on middle class families and small businesses. That would mean a tax increase of 1,500 dollars per year to the average family.

(SALARIES) (HOUSE INCUMBENT) voted to protect (his/her) own pay in the event of a government shutdown while at the same time voting to allow the members of our military to have their salaries suspended if the government shut down.



MESSAGE	GROUP
Medicare	Shift toward voting for Democrat
	Seniors
	Independents
	White non-college
Payroll tax cut	Minorities
	Unmarried women
	Young voters (under age 30)
	Minorities
Salaries	Suburban districts
	New Obama Voters
	Seniors
	White non-college

Shifting the Vote

Remarkably, at the end of the survey, one in ten voters shifted against the incumbent on the named vote. The most significant shift against the Republicans came among constituencies they will need to win in 2012: white seniors shifted against the Republicans by 11 points, joined by 9 percent of suburban voters, 10 percent of white non-college voters, and a striking 16 percent of independent voters, bringing the independent vote margin down to 4 points. At the end of the survey more than half (53 percent) of all independents said that the Republican incumbent has the wrong position on jobs and the economy, and nearly half (49 percent) said the Republican incumbent has the wrong approach to spending and deficits. Importantly, Democrats also gained back key base voters that have fallen off—young voters by 16 percent and unmarried women by 12 percent.

After hearing messages for and against the Republican and Democrats plans, we witnessed an incredible shift among all voters—but especially among key targets. To be sure, this is a tough battleground for Democrats, but it is very much in play. The right messages—framed in terms of long-term solutions for the middle class economy make a big difference.



Big shifters in congressional vote

Now let me ask you again, I know it's a long way off, but thinking about the election for Congress in November 2012, if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for – the Democratic candidate or Republican (HOUSE INCUMBENT)?

