

The Public's Mood

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Americans like winners, and so I thought that in the weeks since the midterm elections, we would see a rise in the approval ratings of the Republicans in Congress and a dip in the President's job approval. I anticipated that GOP talking points would cause shifts, not seismic shifts but demonstrable ones, in public opinion. This morning, [a Washington Post poll](#) [1] shows that in the year ahead the Republicans must tread as carefully as President Obama in navigating a treacherous political landscape that is suspicious of everyone and impatient for results.

The poll shows that 43% of the public trusts President Obama to handle the nation's problems while only 38% trust the Republicans in Congress. Neither number screams public confidence, but what is truly remarkable is the lack of confidence in the GOP. In past elections when the opposition party was swept into control of one or both houses of Congress, that party enjoyed broad public confidence. In 1994, when the GOP took the House, post-election polls showed that 49% of the country trusted them to tackle the nation's problems compared to only 34% who trusted President Clinton. In 2006, when the Democrats reclaimed control of the House, they enjoyed the support of 57% of the country in a post-election survey compared to only 31% who thought President George W. Bush better able than the Democrats to handle the nation's main problems.

This lack of public confidence demonstrates a central fact that Republicans ignore at their peril. The midterm election brought them power, but it did not bring them a mandate. They must explain, convince, and persuade the American people of the rightness of their course in the weeks and months ahead and they must do this without the bully pulpit of the White House. When Speaker Boehner wants to make a point, he can make a point, but he has nothing like the ability to set the agenda that a president enjoys. Of course, President Obama and his communications team have been dreadful at persuading the American people of the rightness of their policies, so don't count the Republicans out.

On specific issues, the President also enjoys far greater confidence than the GOP currently. 53% of respondents trust Obama to do a better job than the GOP at "helping the middle class," while only 38% trust the Republicans to help the middle class. And, 51% of respondents trust the President on health care, compared to that same 38% who trust the Republicans. If Republicans make the repeal of health care reform their central theme in the first few months of 2011, and develop effective arguments, they may be able to equalize those numbers, but I doubt it. And the President and the Democratic National Committee should be filming a thirty second spot with an adorable five year who has a pre-existing condition and was previously denied health insurance but has it today and is getting the care he needs. At a Christmas Party last week, someone said to me that they really wanted to tell all the stories about all the people the health care bill is helping and I said, "No you don't. You want to tell one story and tell it over and over and over." The effort to defend the health care reform law needs its Ryan White, someone who will become the sympathetic face of the issue. If Republicans counter, "Oh, but we don't want to take away Ryan's health care," they are only aiding the effort to personalize the issue and, once personalized, they lose.

There was one issue on which the Republicans in Congress enjoy a significant advantage over the President

according to this most recent poll. 47% of respondents trust them to tackle the federal budget deficit while only 39 percent expressed confidence in the President's ability to do so. As the cost of the war in Iraq winds down, and the 2009 Stimulus monies are completely expensed, the short-term deficit numbers will go down, provided the economy continues to improve. Long-term deficits are another issue but there are two political aspects to the issue that spell danger for the GOP: First, long-term deficit projections are abstract and people don't want to hear about when they are still hurting now, and, second, the GOP approach to the issue means touching the third rail of Social Security, which could cost them the support of seniors that won them the last election in the first place. If they were willing to raise taxes on the super-rich as a means of reducing the long-term deficit, they would not need to touch Social Security. But, as long as the Republican Party is worshiping the false gods of Supply-side economics, they are stuck with a bad hand politically when the topic turns to the one issue on which they enjoy a statistically significant advantage over the President. The poll looked at nine different ways to close the budget deficit and not one received majority support.

These results come at a time when the GOP is not looking ahead to how these issues play out but instead seems focused on how to shovel as many earmarks into law before the current Congress finishes its work, and testing the waters with the in-coming Tea Party members, any one of whom knows that if they want to get on Fox News, all they have to do is denounce a given compromise as insufficiently orthodox. Why, after all, are Republicans like Michelle Bachmann complaining about the compromise on tax cuts the President worked out with Republican Congressional leaders? Because the deal was cut with Obama. It is like Charlie Crist's famous embrace of the President. Achieving agreement with Obama is the kiss of death in Tea Party circles.

The thing the Republicans have had going for them so far is their remarkable unity in the U.S. Senate, their willingness to stand up to the Democratic majority, to refuse to invoke cloture unless they achieved something they wanted. But, some key moderate Senators are facing re-election in 2012, including Maine's Olympia Snowe and Massachusetts' Scott Brown, and they have a difficult balancing act ahead of them: If they move too often to the center, they risk a Tea Party challenge in the primaries and if they move too far to the right, they risk losing re-election. (Of course, the Democrats could help these Senators by nominating far, far-left candidates of their own. Martha Coakley is not the only Martha Coakley in Massachusetts and there really are people in places like Cambridge, Massachusetts and Berkeley, California who think Julian Assange is a hero.)

Overall the Post poll is good news for the President. But, he really, really needs to clean up his communications department. There are issues that an administration must address, but unless the topic is jobs, jobs, jobs, someone other than the President should be addressing the issue in public. (Okay, he gets to give two appearances every six months where he talks about foreign policy.) But, on health care, Secretary Sebelius and that still-to-be-found five-year old should be out front. On deficit issues, have Secretary Geithner out front. On most foreign policy issues have Secretary Clinton and Secretary Gates out front. For three to six months after the State of the Union, the President should only be talking about jobs. The GOP has a mountain of problems and Obama only has two: the economy must improve and he must be more disciplined and viewer-friendly when discussing the economy. But, if he fails on either the score, the GOP will get the opportunity the last midterm did not yet give them, the opportunity to redefine the political narrative.

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[1] http://voices.washingtonpost.com/politics/polling.html?nid=roll_polls