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Americans Disapproving Obama Poised to Enable Republican Gains

By John McCormick and Catherine Dodge - Jul 14, 2010

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Chart: Poll Results

Attachment: Poll results and methodology

Americans disapprove of U.S. President Barack Obama's handling of almost every major issue and are deeply pessimistic about the nation's direction, offering a bullish environment for Republicans in the November congressional elections.

A majority or plurality disapproves of Obama's management of the economy, health care, the budget deficit, the overhaul of financial market regulations and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, according to a Bloomberg National Poll conducted July 9- 12. In addition, almost 6 in 10 respondents say the war in Afghanistan is a lost cause.

Almost two-thirds say they feel the nation is headed in the wrong direction, an even more sour assessment than in March when 58 percent felt that way. Two-thirds of independent voters are pessimistic, while just 56 percent of Democrats offer a vote of confidence.

"They don't see any solutions in sight," said J. Ann Selzer, president of Selzer & Co., a Des Moines, Iowa-based firm that conducted the nationwide survey. "They have been hammered by the economy and there is a disconnect between the lives Americans are living and Washington. They seem to have lost hope."

Poll respondents are divided on their congressional preference between Democrats and Republicans, with both sides getting 43 percent support. Among those who say they are most likely to vote, Republicans are favored, 48 percent to 40 percent. The Republican advantage is even greater among likely voters who view the election as exceptionally important, with Republicans beating Democrats 56 percent to 34 percent.

Control of Congress

For the Democrats, who control Congress and the White House, the survey shows the potential for losses in November, when voters will fill all 435 House seats, 36 Senate seats and 37 governorships. The outcome could affect Obama's ability to move his agenda through Congress for the two years leading up to his own 2012 re-election bid.

The fate of incumbents will depend to some extent on what happens to the economy in the next four months and whether unemployment drops much from its current 9.5 percent. A rising stock market could help as well. So far this year, the S&P 500 stock index has declined 1.8 percent.

The public's disenchantment with the president's policies doesn't extend to voter feelings about Obama himself, as he gets a job approval rating of 52 percent and personally is viewed favorably by 55 percent. Obama, 48, remains more popular than any of the Republican figures tested in the poll and is topped only by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus, the new commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, among a list of 15 people and political parties reviewed.

Republican Leaders

The only bright spot for Republican candidates is for Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, who gets a 32 percent favorable rating and an 18 percent unfavorable grade. Better-known party leaders such as former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, both have negative ratings that outweigh the positive views.

Although turnout in midterm elections is historically lower than in presidential races, the electorate is interested. Four-fifths of Americans who plan to vote say November's election is very or exceptionally important.

The likelihood to vote is strongest among older voters, Republicans and those with the highest incomes. Among those 55 and older, three-quarters say they will definitely vote, compared with 48 percent of those younger than 35. Four-fifths of Republicans say they will definitely vote, compared with 65 percent of Democrats and 62 percent of independents.

Referendum on Obama

Seeking to capitalize on the intensity expressed by voters, Republicans want to make the election a national referendum on Obama and the party in power, while the White House and Democrats argue it is about going forward, rather than backward to failed policies.

The challenge for Democrats will be to translate their vision of a better future into more positive feelings about the economy among voters. In the poll, Republicans have the advantage among the independents often critical to winning elections. Among independents likely to vote, Republican congressional candidates are preferred to Democrats, 50 percent to 29 percent.

"Anything that has been tried hasn't resulted in making anything better in the world where ordinary people live," Selzer said. "That's a bad scenario for incumbents of the majority party."

Incumbent Disadvantage

A third of poll participants say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who has served in Congress for many years. About one-fifth of likely voters say the election is more about sending a message, while three-quarters say it is about picking the party that has the best ideas.

"I don't know what these people are thinking in Washington," says poll respondent Jeff Lockman, 41, a professional golfer and Republican from Malvern, Pennsylvania. "They are going in 10 different directions and they really don't know what to focus on."

The proportion who feel the nation is headed in the wrong direction is about the same as at this point in 1994, when Republicans took control of Congress, and 2006, when Democrats took over.

The public also has soured on Obama's foreign-policy priority, the war in Afghanistan. While the president has ordered an expansion of forces to turn the tide in a conflict where he says the U.S. has a critical stake, 58 percent say it is a lost cause, compared with 36 percent who say it can still be won. A slim majority of Republicans -- 52 percent -- say the U.S. can still win in Afghanistan, while 71 percent of Democrats say the conflict is lost.

Afghanistan Withdrawal

Six in 10 Americans say it would be best to stick with Obama's plan to start withdrawing forces in July 2011, while one-third say they remain open to keeping the same number of troops there, or even adding additional forces.

Reflecting the belief among many that the war cannot be won, a third of Americans say they have become less supportive of the effort there in recent months.

The Bloomberg National Poll is based on interviews with 1,004 U.S. adults ages 18 or older. Percentages based on the full sample may have a maximum margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Karyn Bowman, who studies public opinion at the American Enterprise Institute, a public-policy research group in Washington, calls the poll "very, very grim news for the Democrats."

At the same time, she says, one silver lining for Democrats is that Republicans have yet to convince voters that they have a plan.

Obama Visit

One signpost for Democrats in the poll is the finding that just 26 percent of Americans say it would help a Democratic candidate in their area to get a visit from Obama, while 20 percent say it would hurt the candidate and 54 percent say it wouldn't matter or they don't know.

Obama's worst ratings are for his handling of the budget deficit, where 59 percent disapprove and 37 percent approve. It's his worst grade for that subject in any of four Bloomberg polls taken since September 2009. The Obama administration expects a record budget deficit this year of more than \$1.5 trillion, or 10.6 percent of GDP, according to projections the White House released in February. It was \$1.4 trillion for the 2008-2009 fiscal year, which covers the end of George W. Bush's presidency, and Obama has said that the current fiscal shortfall as well as the unemployment rate are inheritances from his Republican predecessor's administration.

"My biggest fear is we have people in government who don't have a clue about what is going on in the economy," says poll respondent Jim Heeter, 66, from Glendale, Arizona. "They have never run a business or had to make a payroll."

Economy, Health Care

Slim majorities disapprove of Obama's handling of the economy and health care. When it comes to creating jobs, he gets 46 percent approval, addressing problems on Wall Street, 42 percent support, running the war in Afghanistan, 46 percent approve, and managing the BP Plc oil spill, 46 percent support.

Forty-five percent say they have become more supportive in recent months of tougher regulations for Wall Street. The momentum is heading in the opposite direction from the White House and Democrats on most other issues.

Almost half say they have become less supportive in recent months of federal money being loaned to automotive companies to help them stay in business, while 37 percent have become less supportive of the health-care overhaul passed by Congress earlier this year. A majority, 61 percent, say the nation should wait and see how the health-care legislation works or leave it alone, while 37 percent want to see it repealed.

Arizona Immigration Law

Almost half of Americans say they have also grown more supportive of allowing local law enforcement to detain anyone who can't produce proof of citizenship when stopped for an offense, as is contemplated in an Arizona law. Obama has criticized the measure and the Justice Department has announced it plans to sue Arizona.

At least half of respondents also say they would be less likely to support candidates who voted to give financial assistance to the banking or automobile industries.

Americans are roughly divided on whether they would be more or less likely to support a candidate who voted against extending unemployment benefits because of concern over the cost. A measure providing such support worth \$34 billion is stalled in Congress.

Clinton Popularity

The disaffection with Obama and Democrats doesn't carry over to all Democrats. Hillary Clinton, 62, is viewed favorably by 61 percent of respondents and a quarter of Americans, including 30 percent of Republicans and 21 percent of Democrats, say the nation would be in a better place if she had been elected president.

The Tea Party movement, which has been mainly associated with Republicans, has lukewarm support in the poll. A majority of 58 percent of all respondents says it would make no difference to them if a candidate was backed by Tea Party activists, while a third of Republicans say that kind of backing would make a candidate more appealing to them.

Those who are more likely to think the Tea Party is a simplistic and misguided movement -- 44 percent of all respondents -- include Democrats, 65 percent, and those with the highest incomes, 52 percent. Independent voters are divided on whether it is misguided or has rightly identified that the nation would be better served by reduced federal government, compared with 39 percent overall.