

Date: October 20, 2009
To: Glen Bolger, Public Opinion Strategies and interested parties
From: Stanley B. Greenberg, Andrew Baumann and Jesse Contario

A Response to POS: Congressional Survey Shows Difficulties for both Republican, Democratic Incumbents

Tarnished Republican Brand Could Limit GOP Gains

We've been alerted by our good friends on the conservative side of the political spectrum at Public Opinion Strategies that POS partner Glen Bolger has been [posting](#) on a "semi-secret" Democracy Corps poll across the Congressional Battleground. We would like to take this opportunity to both thank him for taking such an interest in our work and to respond to some of his interpretations of our data.

First, we would like to note that this is not a "semi-secret poll." We have the frequency questionnaire posted at the top of the polling section of our website for everyone to view. Not all of our Democracy Corps surveys and research are released with the same level of "fanfare." More important, we quibble with Glen's conclusions about the status of Democratic incumbents and especially about the position of vulnerable Republican incumbents and the Republican Party more generally.

Glen asserts that "this is NOT a pox on both your houses of incumbents," but our analysis of the data, especially when read in the context of other national data, is entirely the opposite. It is true that in this survey, the Republican incumbents have stronger numbers on some attributes than their Democratic counterparts. But that is expected, considering that nearly all of these Democrats are freshmen or sophomores while most of the Republican incumbents have long served their districts.

Yet despite this advantage, these Republican incumbents have lost significant standing since our last survey in July (much like everyone else in Washington), and show serious weakness on a number of important measures where you would expect a better performance from long-time incumbents. For example, just 40 percent of voters in the Republican districts say they will vote to reelect their member, the same result as in the Democratic seats. When we phrase this question differently, a 50-percent majority now say that they "CAN'T vote to reelect (their incumbent by name) because we need new people that will fix Washington" versus just 39 percent who say they "WILL vote to reelect (their incumbent) because he or she is doing a good job." This represents a large drop since July and is a much worse showing than the Democratic



incumbents. Finally, the Republican incumbents are only able to manage 48 percent of the vote in a named matchup with generic challengers – exactly the same level of support that the Democratic incumbents receive. And while the percentage supporting the generic challenger is lower in the Republican-held seats, our Voter Choice Scale¹ identifies 19 percent of voters as “winnable” for the Democratic challengers (against just 10 percent for the Republican incumbents), suggesting that the challengers have much more room to grow in these seats. Clearly, these Republican incumbents are very much at risk.

Certainly, this poll does point to challenges for some of these newly elected Democratic incumbents as well. Many face tough races in 2010 as they represent the most Republican districts in the Democratic caucus (President Bush carried these 40 districts by 11 points in 2004, and Senator McCain beat President Obama across these districts by 1 point last November), and we presume some of those leanings will be more apparent in 2010.

Moreover, Glen is using an artificial base point – citing our April survey – well within Obama’s honeymoon, inflating the sense of movement. Glen is certainly right that many of these incumbents will face tough fights in 2010, and they will need to raise their standing on some key attributes to secure re-election, though with these incumbents on average nearing 50 percent on the vote and approval, most would likely win an election held today.

The battleground includes our top tier of the 20 most vulnerable seats and a second tier of the next 20, with margins remaining stable from our last survey in July. Democrats will likely lose some seats in the midterm elections, but based on current polling, they would likely lose half the number contemplated by Charlie Cook and some Republicans. One of the main factors that produced the wave elections of 1994, 2006 and 2008 was a significant favorability advantage for the out-of-power party that does not exist today. In fact, the continuing tarnish on the national Republican brand is perhaps the biggest hurdle to larger Republican gains in 2010.

Put simply, the Republican Party is as unpopular as they have ever been and the internal dynamics of their party will only serve to reinforce this unpopularity with the middle of the electorate. A brand new [Washington Post survey](#) notes that Republicans are at a new low in party identification with just 19 percent (including 17 percent of independents) confident in the Republican Party’s ability to “make the right decisions for the country’s future,” while Democrats lead the generic ballot test by 12 points. This just adds to a slew of public polls that we [analyzed](#) earlier this month showing the Republican obstruction on health care has cemented a view that they are putting politics ahead of the country’s problems and, as Bloomberg News [noted](#), “appear to have hurt the party” significantly. Indeed, our own national [data](#) finds just 30 percent with a favorable opinion of the GOP while 44 have an unfavorable opinion. That -14-point net favorability rating is nearly twice as bad as it was on Election Day in 2008. Moreover, the net 17-point favorability gap between the two parties is down only slightly from Election

¹ The Voter Choice Scale uses an algorithm based on the vote, follow up questions about the likelihood of the respondent to change his or her vote, and the thermometer ratings of the candidates and the parties to place each respondent into one of 8 categories indicating the strength of their commitment to vote for a certain candidate. “Winnable” voters are those voters not currently voting for a candidate who are most likely to be won over.



Day 2008, and is still substantially larger than when Democrats secured their first of two successive wave victories on Election Day in 2006. Moreover, 56 percent agree that Republicans are “more interested in partisan politics than solving the country’s problems” while just 35 percent think Republicans are “on your side,” down 7 points from when we last asked it the summer before the wave election of 2006.

This holds true in the congressional battleground as well. In both 2006 and 2008, as the Republican brand declined and voters in the battleground began to abandon Republican incumbents, they had an alternative that they found at least moderately appealing in the Democratic Party. For instance, in a Democracy Corps poll conducted in December 2007,² across the 40 most vulnerable Republican-controlled seats, the Democratic Party had a net favorability rating of -6 points, but 13 points better than the Republican Party’s net rating at the time. With a current net favorability rating of -13 and no advantage over the Democrats, the Republican Party is not currently viewed as an appealing alternative, even in a Democratic battleground that voted for both George W. Bush and John McCain. And matters are even worse for the Republicans in their own seats, where their party has a net favorability rating of -16 points and the Republicans in Congress a striking net favorability of -20 points. There is no way of getting around the fact that Republicans are deeply unpopular in these battleground seats.

Glen also claims that “it’s a lot easier for the GOP to fix our fading problems than it is for the Dems to fix their growing problems.” Again, we couldn’t disagree more. As noted above, Republican obstruction on health care is damaging the party (as even party luminaries like Bob Dole and Bill Frist now agree), but Republican leaders are [doubling down](#) on this tactic. Indeed, as our recent [report](#) on focus groups conducted with Republican base voters showed, Republican leaders may not have a real choice as they must appease a ravenous base that believes President Obama is deliberately trying to advance a “secret agenda” to undermine our nation’s founding principles. With the need to satisfy a base so out of touch with the mainstream of the electorate, it is difficult to foresee when Republicans will be able to improve their standing. On the other hand, it is plausible that Democrats will improve their position with the passage of health care and some improvement in the economy.

² Based on Democracy Corps survey of 876 likely voters across 40 vulnerable Republican-held districts conducted December 10-13, 2007.