How To Talk About The Economy With The Rising American Electorate

As we enter the beginning of the next presidential election, the economy is setting the terms of debate. Recent economic news suggests a slowdown, after a period of some recovery in the job market and rising corporate profits – and the consequences of this slowdown on progressive voters are fully reflected in the latest Democracy Corps/Women’s Voices poll. More importantly, while voters’ perceptions of the economy reflect these trends, they also reveal deeper concerns that transcend today’s headlines and will likely live on beyond the so-called recovery from crisis. Voters do not think anyone knows how to or has the will to solve America’s profound and persistent economic problems. Not the Democrats and certainly not the Republicans according to this poll, which shows voters are pulling back sharply from the Republican approach to the economy and the budget, including Medicare.

We saw in 2010 that unmarried women, voters of color and younger voters who make up the Rising American Electorate (RAE) and the progressive base turned out at lower rates than in 2008 and they also supported Democratic candidates by smaller margins. Unmarried women, younger voters, African American and Hispanic voters in this survey support Obama with 62 percent of the vote, a significant drop from 69 percent in 2008. Despite the fact that the Republicans passed a budget in the House this past month that would privatize Medicare and gut Medicaid, programs that are critical to many of these voters, their support for Democrats leveled off in 2010 and has not yet returned to 2008 levels. 

This economic debate is not settled – it is contested – and while Democrats have an advantage over the Republicans, neither party offered a compelling narrative to convince RAE voters that they are at the heart of their agenda.

The following memo is based on a national survey of 1480 likely 2012 voters, including a base sample of 1,000 voters and oversamples of unmarried women (200), youth (200) and people of color (80). It fielded from May 21st to May 25th. The total sample size of RAE voters is 885 respondents and carries a margin of error of +/- 3.29 points.
The RAE Continues to Struggle Financially

RAE voters are more likely than non-RAE voters to say that the country is on the right track and that the economy has already bottomed out and starting to improve. This more optimistic perspective reflects the partisan leanings of the RAE – they are more Democratic – but also obscures the fact that their mood overall is relatively downbeat. These voters are evenly divided on whether or not the country is going in the right direction (43 percent right direction, 43 percent wrong track) and less than half believe the economy is starting to improve (47 percent).

![Chart showing RAE and Non-RAE divided on country direction]
The irony is that while RAE voters evince more optimism about the direction of the economy than non-RAE voters, their own personal economic struggles are more acute—62 percent say they have cut back on driving due to the cost of gas, 46 percent say that they or someone in their family has faced reduced wages, hours or benefits at work, 40 percent say job loss has affected them or their family, 39 percent say that they or someone in their family delayed or canceled a doctor’s visit due to cost, 33 percent say that they or someone in their family lost health insurance coverage, and 22 percent say that they have fallen behind on their mortgage payment.
This is the real economy for these voters, stripped of partisan biases.

**Obama Standing Improves Among RAE but Still Underperforms Relative to 2008**

Since the killing of Osama Bin Laden, we see a rise in approval of President Obama’s job performance among RAE voters – increasing from 58 percent approve to 64 percent approve. But on all other political measures ranging from views of the Democratic Party to the Republicans in Congress, there has been no change. This stagnation likely reflects the ongoing economic struggles of RAE voters; support for President Obama has stayed in the low 60s (62 percent in May 2011) since the beginning of the year, 8 – 10 points below their support for him in 2008. Congressional Democrats fare worse, with only 57 percent supporting a Democratic candidate, compared to 67 percent in 2008.
The drivers of this underperformance are primarily unmarried women who are 10 points less likely to say they will vote to reelect the President than in 2008 (60 percent in 2012, 70 percent in 2008) and a collapse among younger voters (54 percent in 2012, 66 percent in 2008). Only 49 percent of young voters say they will vote for a Democrat in the congressional contest.
Democratic support among unmarried women has improved since January (then 57 percent Democratic, 36 percent Republican) and the margin increased by 10 points.
The Path Forward: Put the Middle Class at the Heart of the Progressive Agenda

Many voters look around them and draw the conclusion that no one fights for them; politicians help the rich get richer and corporations collect record profits while refusing to hire or increase wages or salaries for workers. Democrats regained an advantage over Republicans on economic issues, but the numbers have the issue contested. Only 50 percent of RAE voters believe that the Democrats would do a better job than the Republicans (31 percent) on the economy; only 54 percent believe that the Democrats have the right approach on the economy and jobs and only a plurality, 45 percent, think Democrats have the right approach to spending and deficits.

The RAE thinks Democrats have right approach to economy

![Graph showing voter opinions on economic issues]

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
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<td>The Economy</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<td>Right approach to the economy and jobs</td>
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Conclusion

The 2010 election cycle saw a significant withdrawal from the Democrats among some members of the RAE, mostly because the economic change they voted for in 2008 was slow in coming and progressive messaging often failed to reflect their economic reality. Their participation and choices in 2012 depends on whether or not they effectively correct that mistake.