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The Battleground 2008

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With the major Party conventions now behind us, the race for the White House enters its final, breakneck phase. The race remains competitive and within the margin of error. While McCain leads Obama by 4 points nationally, Obama leads McCain by the same 4-point margin in the crucial battleground states. Still, with the exception of the Democratic convention, few would disagree that McCain has seized the initiative in this race for the past several weeks now – and with it, the momentum. In particular, his choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice presidential nominee has achieved what he was powerless to do on his own – energize the GOP base. But 7 weeks is an eternity in politics, and with four debates scheduled, dozens of ads still in the can, and at least one or two unforeseen surprises, this race is in many ways finally beginning—and the choice is really getting framed for independent voters.

As it usually does, the political terrain has shifted dramatically in the weeks immediately following the Democratic and GOP conventions. McCain owned a 1-point lead in the Battleground survey conducted just before the Democratic convention (47% to 46%); he has added 3 points to that lead since (48% to 44%). Only 5% of voters are undecided, but that small figure masks much greater fluctuations within electorate right now. One of the most noticeable shifts, for example, is in the enthusiasm gap between the two parties. All year, our Battleground surveys have consistently shown the Democrats converting more of their Party faithful than the Republicans were of theirs, but the Palin pick has awakened the GOP base and now the Republicans are converting a whopping 91% of Republican voters. At the same time, Obama needs to frame the central choice in this race and put McCain on the defense, as he has started to do in the last two days. Only 83% of Democrats are voting for Obama. The gap in enthusiasm can also be seen in the behavior of voters on the generic Congressional ballot, as 93% of those who vote for the Republican candidate are voting for McCain/Palin, compared to 82% of those voting for the Democratic candidate who vote for Obama/Biden. Overall, the generic Congressional ballot remains closer, with 48% supporting a generic Democrat, 40% support a generic Republican.

McCain's marginal lead nationwide is attributable to more than just a gap in Party enthusiasm, of course. Swing voters are true to form, shifting back and forth from Obama to McCain in recent weeks. McCain has built a lead of 12 points among independent voters (this is up from 10 points in August and a 14-point deficit in May), particularly among independent men (+20). Independent women also favor McCain by 3 points, where Obama was winning them by a slim margin in August. McCain has also taken a bite out of undecided voters on the generic Congressional ballot. Whereas McCain was winning these voters by just 2 points in August (36% McCain / 34% Obama / 30% undecided), he is winning them by double digits today.

Yet the key battleground states – on which these races are ultimately waged, and won, in a system based on electoral votes – show a more positive picture. If the race were decided today, Obama would be the winner by virtue of the electoral math,¹ which is underscored by his 4-point lead in battleground states (48% to 44%, with 5% undecided). Obama is also winning in Midwest states (+12) and states in the West (+14) by comfortable margins. McCain's strength nationally is buttressed by strong showings in the South (+14), Mountain States (+21), South Central (+21), and Central Plains (+17).

The larger concern for the Obama campaign, however, is in shifts among key demographic subgroups. McCain has managed to wrest votes from some of the swing Democratic segments of the electorate, most notably among women. In August, Obama led decisively among women (+13); now, his margins have vanished (+2). Obama continues to lead among voters under 30 (+10), women under 45 (+10), non-college educated women (+9), unmarried women (+24), Blacks (+83), and Hispanics (+40), but he is now losing voters age 35-64 (-7), women 45 and older (-1), unmarried men (-7), and married women (-14). Obama continues to trail among voters over 65 (-5), white women (-18), and married men (-13). Noticeably, McCain's margin among men (-11) far exceeds Obama's margin among women (+2), mirroring the key problem John Kerry had in 2004. Among a key demographic—older white non-college educated women—Obama trails by 10 points.

Undecided voters are a small bunch, but with neither candidate passing the fifty percent threshold, they would provide the winning margin if the race were held today. In addition to the fact that undecided voters typically break for the Party out of power, the partisan profile of the swing voters appears very favorable for Obama. A plurality of undecided voters identifies as Democrats (46%), and another 43% identify as independents. Only 11% of undecided voters identify as Republicans. Noticeably, 64% of undecided voters are women, 65% are non-college educated, and 72% are above 45 years of age.

In the end, however, it will come down to *turnout*. By the numbers, McCain enjoys a more energized base today, but the Democrats are registering thousands of Democrats every day, Obama raised a record \$66 million in August alone, and the Obama campaign has been developing an unprecedented ground game in every battleground state for the better part of a year. Most important, Obama's ace in the hole throughout this whole process has been his ability to bring new voters to the polls. Young voters are always tricky to capture in polls of likely voters, both because of their unreliable turnout in such elections and their propensity not to participate in polls.

Assessing the political landscape more generally, the larger trends still favor Obama. While the wind has been at McCain's back for several weeks now, Obama continues to own fundamental advantages on most of the themes and issues that define this election, including change, the

¹ Real Clear Politics, September 15, 2008:

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/maps/obama_vs_mccain/?map=10

economy, and the war in Iraq. McCain has done an extremely effective job, however, of exploiting to the fullest his advantages on strength of leadership and national security. Obama must not allow McCain to rack up such decisive margins on two dimensions of leadership so central to the presidency.

In terms of their personal images, both candidates continue to enjoy similar positive profiles, but Obama has an edge among swing undecideds. Fifty-seven percent of voters have a favorable opinion of Obama (39% strong), compared to 37% who have an unfavorable impression (27% strong). This is virtually unchanged from August (56% fav / 38% unfav). McCain's personal affect is no different; 58% have a favorable opinion (35% strong) and 37% say they have an unfavorable impression of the man (24% strong). This is also unchanged from August (57% fav / 36% unfav).

In the crucial battleground states, however, Obama enjoys the stronger personal profile. Sixty-one percent of voters in battleground states have warm feelings toward Obama (34% unfav), compared to 55% of the same for McCain (41% unfav). The difference between Obama and McCain is even larger among undecided voters on the presidential ballot, though the high margin of error associated with the small number of undecided warrants caution. A slim majority (51%) has a favorable impression of Obama (10% unfav), compared to 41% who hold favorable opinions of McCain (28% unfav). It is worth noting that McCain's unfavorable ratings among undecided voters are nearly three times that of Obama's. Somewhat ironically, however, it is independents that are holding Obama back right now. Independents are 12 points more favorable toward McCain (63% fav / 31% unfav) than Obama (51% fav / 39% unfav).

The leadership traits associated with the presidential candidates provide more clues into the dynamics of support on the ballot. Obama holds advantages on many of the traits and issues that are central to this race, including bringing about change (+18) – despite McCain's recent attempt at re-branding – improving health care (+18), creating jobs and improving the economy (+8), uniting the country (+7), and fighting for “people like me” (+6). On the other hand, McCain is able to neutralize Obama's strengths because he is seen by decisive margins as a strong leader (-14) who will keep America safe (-24). Voters are effectively split on the core measure of “keeping America prosperous” (+1 Obama), as well as honesty (even), sharing their values (+1), and reducing gas and energy costs (-1).

Among independent voters, the profile of the race is of real concern to Obama. Independents give McCain a 38-point advantage on national security, a 26-point advantage on being a strong leader, an 11-point advantage on keeping America prosperous, and he ties Obama on jobs and the economy (+1 Obama). Even on which candidate can best deliver change, Obama only has a 9-point advantage over McCain among independents.

In battleground states, Obama increases his margin (or reduces his deficit) on every leadership trait by an average of 7 points. Notably, he leads McCain by 13 points on “keeping America prosperous” and 18 points on “creating jobs and improving the economy.” Among independents, however, Obama performs worse on every leadership trait by an average of 10 points.

As we have seen throughout 2008, the economy has thoroughly displaced the war in Iraq and terrorism as voters' top of mind concern. Fully 26% of voters cite the economy and jobs as the most pressing issues facing the nation, a number that excludes other salient economic issues, such as health care costs (8%), gas and energy prices (9%), and retirement security/Social Security (6%). In other words, roughly half of all voters (49%) cite pocketbook economic issues as their top concerns. The economy and jobs is also the top issue across all key demographic and regional battlegrounds. In contrast, fewer than two-in-ten cite foreign policy issues, such as terrorism and homeland security (10%) and cite the war in Iraq (8%) as the defining issues of our time. No other issue achieves even

5% of mentions. Obama wins voters who cite the economy and jobs (+20), health care costs (+42), and the war in Iraq (+45), while McCain leads among voters who cite terrorism and homeland security (+92), gas and energy prices (+51), and retirement security/Social Security (+15).

That voters give Obama solid advantages on the dimension of change, and on domestic policy generally, would suggest that the Democrat is well positioned heading into November. However, McCain's ability to convert his decisive leads on national security and strength of leadership into a ballot advantage belies the relatively low salience voters attach to terrorism and national security when asked to name their most important problem. These dimensions are more about character than issue positions, and character determines the election.

Voters are much more satisfied with the candidates in the presidential race than they were just one month ago (72% satisfied, up from 55%). The choices of Joe Biden and Sarah Palin as the vice presidential nominees appears to have helped both candidates, especially McCain. Seventy-four percent of Democrats and 72% of Republicans are now satisfied with their choices for president and vice president (up from 70% and 44%, respectively). Looking at voters' impressions of the vice presidential nominees, we can see why. Both candidates are nearly as well liked as their tickets' headliners. Forty-nine percent have a favorable opinion of Joe Biden (29% unfav), and 53% have a favorable impression of Sarah Palin (29% unfav).

Yet some voters still have reservations about personal characteristics beyond the candidates' control. With his choice of Palin, McCain seems to have assuaged concerns of some on the Republican right that he was not conservative *enough*, but his age remains an issue. Twenty-eight percent say their neighbors would be "not at all comfortable" with a candidate who is 72 years old. To a lesser extent, Obama's unique racial heritage is a hurdle – insofar as voters are willing to admit it. Six percent say their neighbors would be "not at all comfortable" voting for an African-American for president.

Both Obama and McCain are breaking through in paid communications and earned media, yet neither candidate is breaking away with voters who hear their messages. Roughly half say they are more likely to vote for each candidate (48% for each) based on what they have heard, read, or seen about the candidates recently. Slightly fewer say they are less likely to vote for Obama and McCain (46% and 44%, respectively). Obama is outdistancing McCain in battleground states (53% to 45% more likely, respectively), while McCain is besting Obama among independents nationwide (54% to 41%, respectively).

In what could become a defining trend in this race, more than four-in-ten voters think McCain is running the more negative campaign, compared to 28% of the same for Obama. It should be noted that this poll was conducted before what has now become a rare consensus among the media that McCain has repeatedly falsified information in his ads and broken his pledge run an honorable campaign.

The dynamics of support on the generic Congressional ballot suggest that Democrats are poised to enlarge their majority after November, though the races have closed. The Democrats still continue to have a lead over the GOP (48% to 40%), with 12% undecided. Despite the fact that Congress's job approval rating is hovering at record lows (19% approve / 72% disapprove), voters continue to believe that a return to GOP rule would be decidedly worse. In fact, voters' appetite for the Democrats brand of leadership is equal to what it was at about this point in 2006.² The generic Congressional ballot shows a more common gender gap, with Democrats leading by +13 among women and +3 among men—a clear formula for success.

² Battleground, September 24-27, 2006. Generic Congressional: 49% Democrat, 41% Republican, 10% undecided.

Despite his slim deficit on the ballot today, Barack Obama remains well positioned for victory in November. But to do so, he must seize the initiative, force McCain to respond to *his* framing of the central question in this race, and simultaneously start to erode McCain's advantages on the dimensions of leadership and national security. Voters already see Obama as the candidate who embodies change and who will improve the economy and health care, but he needs to engage in greater content on the economy, especially among independents and blue-collar voters, and he needs to close the leadership gap.