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**Polling Memo: Before the Debates**

With the debates approaching – albeit their importance debatable – the most perplexing element of the 2012 presidential campaign is this: Barack Obama could win.

The condition of the economy suggests otherwise. The general rule is straightforward; when economies are bad, incumbent presidents pay the price. This year, it's not so simple.

The absence of a compelling economic plan from Mitt Romney, doubts about his priorities, his shortfall in personal popularity and his campaign missteps have combined to make the contest a more competitive one than 8.1 percent unemployment would predict. Indeed the irony of this election is that, since the conventions, it's gone from a race that Romney has tried to win by not being Obama to one in which Obama has advanced simply by not being Romney.

That's a surprise, given Obama's vulnerabilities. The nation is crawling on bloodied knees out of the longest, deepest downturn since the Great Depression. Unemployment, 6.1 percent when Obama was nominated, is 8.1 percent now. Underemployment is down from its peak in 2009, but still an extraordinarily high 14.7 percent. Average length of unemployment, 17.7 weeks four years ago, is 39.2 weeks now. Median incomes last year were their lowest since 1996.

That is not the kind of change voters signed up for in 2008.

A president who's presided over these kinds of numbers – indeed, over 43 straight months of 8+ percent unemployment – is not well-positioned to win re-election. Neither is one with less-than 50 percent approval in September of an election year, and majority disapproval of his economic performance.

GAME – So why is Obama in the game? Polling results suggest a range of reasons:

- Obama continues to benefit from comparison to his predecessor, the most unpopular second-term president of the postwar era. After this long at the helm, Obama would be expected to own the economy. Instead, remarkably, most registered voters blame George W. Bush, not him (52-34 percent), for the country's current economic problems. That includes 52 percent of independents, often swing voters in national elections.
- Another Bush legacy is a dramatic break in the gradually increasing competitiveness of the Republican Party in partisan affiliation. Twenty years of gains led the GOP to the holy grail of parity with the Democrats in self-identification in 2003. Since then, though, Republican allegiance has fallen, from 31 percent on average that year to 24 percent on average the last three years straight. Independents now predominate; unanchored by

partisan predispositions, they introduce volatility. Nonetheless, the decline in GOP allegiance can only help Obama, as it did in 2008, when Democrats exceeded Republicans in turnout by 6 percentage points.

- In a highly partisan age, Obama has retained his core supporters. And demographics are on his side: Obama lost whites by 12 points in 2008, about the average for a Democratic presidential candidate. But whites have seen their share of the electorate slide steadily, from 90 percent in 1976 to 74 percent four years ago. The growing proportion of nonwhites favors Obama by 3-1. To the extent they show up to vote, he's helped.
- Bad as the economy is, it's been worse – and what matters is not only the level of discontent but its trajectory. The weekly Bloomberg Consumer Comfort Index, while very low in historical terms, is on track for a 2012 average that'll be its highest since 2007. Unemployment peaked at 10 percent, and underemployment at 17.4 percent, in October 2009. Long-term unemployment, while 39.2 weeks now, peaked at 40.9 weeks in November 2011. Recent polls have suggested an easing in the number of Americans who say the country is seriously off on the wrong track.
- And there's Romney. His resume may be perfect for a different election; for this one, less so. Public anger still focuses on Wall Street and the financial institutions that are seen to have led the charge off the cliff. A majority sees the economic system overall as favoring the wealthy; the Census Bureau reported two weeks ago that what recovery has occurred disproportionately has benefited the well-to-do. All this is hardly hospitable terrain for a candidate who's a former corporate takeover specialist, one of the wealthiest candidates ever to seek the presidency, son of a corporate titan, with a 14 percent tax bill (two-thirds think he didn't pay his fair share) and the accoutrements of wealth and power.

ATTRIBUTES – The news media have focused on Romney's vast likeability gap with Obama, but that is not the main game. Presidents aren't elected to be beer buddies but to run the country. More important (in addition to partisanship and trust to handle economic policy) is the public's sense that Romney is less attuned than Obama to the economic problems of average Americans – a lack of empathy that does matter, significantly, in vote preferences.

Among the data: Seventy-four percent of Americans say Romney has little or nothing in common with them. (Fewer, albeit 59 percent, say the same about Obama; these from a recent Esquire/Yahoo! News poll.) Romney trails by 15 percentage points among registered voters in trust to better advance the interests of the middle class and by 10 points in better understanding ordinary folks' economic problems. Fifty-eight percent think he'd pursue policies that favor the wealthy, vs. just 23 percent who say the same about Obama.

Moreover, while benefiting from Obama's weak performance on the economy, Romney has not made the case that he'd do better. Remarkably given Obama's performance, registered voters split 47-45 percent, Obama-Romney, in trust to handle the economy in the last ABC News/Washington Post poll. Romney also trailed numerically in trust to handle taxes – never a

good sign for a GOP candidate on one of their party's signature issues. Obama even was competitive in trust to handle the deficit, particularly unusual for a Democrat.

In addition to suspicions about a perceived tilt toward the wealthy, these results reflect both Romney's personal disconnect and his failure to enunciate an affirmative reason for voters to support him. Registered voters by 63-31 percent say Romney has not done enough to explain what policies he'd pursue as president. (On Obama, the judgment is not positive, but much less negative – 49-46 percent.) Romney trails Obama by 10 points in strong enthusiasm among his own supporters. And ABC/Post polls have documented Romney's persistent shortfall in favorability, the most basic measure of a public figure's personal popularity – a measure on which he's been underwater in 12 of 14 surveys the past year.

The "47 percent" comment hardly helped – Romney's remark, at a surreptitiously taped fundraiser in Florida, that nearly half of Americans don't pay taxes, feel victimized and over-rely on government assistance. The risk is not so much of this creating a negative image, but, potentially more damaging, that it could reinforce an existing one.

One question is whether the comment motivates Obama's supporters to turn out against Romney; another, whether it may demotivate potential supporters who conclude that Romney's not running the race they wanted to see. Troublingly for him, the public by a wide 61-35 percent expresses an unfavorable opinion of how Romney's handling his campaign – up by a dozen points since midsummer, now including 64 percent of independents and one in four in his own Republican Party.

**POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY** – For all that, this election, somewhat more explicitly than usual, also is about fundamental political and economic philosophies. And on these both candidates have competing advantages, clearly apparent in ABC/Post polling and in their own thrusts and parries – and likely fodder for Wednesday's debate.

An important one for Romney is size of government. Registered voters by 59-35 percent say they prefer a smaller government that does less over a larger government that does more. But they say the opposite about what Obama prefers – by a vast 73-16 percent, he's seen as favoring larger government. Romney's on the right side of this equation (69-18 percent, smaller vs. larger government); hence, he's hit Obama over the head repeatedly with the big-government club.

Whether it's enough is an open question, because expressed preference for smaller government may be more of an aspiration than a focused demand, given the lack of consensus on where to cut. Interestingly, for example, registered voters by 51-37 percent say federal spending on infrastructure projects, rather than cutting taxes, is the better way for government to try to create jobs. That tilts part of the argument back to Obama.

So does another question, one assessing attitudes about economic fairness. Registered voters divide 54-36 percent on what's the bigger problem – "unfairness in the economic system that favors the wealthy," or "over-regulation of the free market that interferes with growth and prosperity." That neatly describes the Democratic/Republican, Obama/Romney difference on the

subject, and it shows up overwhelmingly in vote preferences. Those who see unfairness as the bigger problem favor Obama by 71-20 percent. Those who say it's over-regulation favor Romney, 87-11 percent.

With all this in the mix, the debates have been described as critical. So may they be – but likewise, maybe not. In [a review](#) we published in 2008 of polling data since 1960, we found just one debate that appeared directly to influence vote preferences, toward Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The debates, though, can have other, more subtle impacts on campaign dynamics – confirming predispositions rather than shifting them, for example by reassuring voters that their preferred candidate in fact has the chops for the job. This year, Obama's task, deflecting blame for the economy, is no easy one. But Romney's may be tougher still: not to reinforce existing attitudes about his priorities, plans and personal attributes, but to change them.