

Putting the Kitchen Table Issues Back on the Table

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John McCain is winning—and winning handily. This is from the latest Franklin & Marshall College National Poll of 1,501 registered adults conducted in partnership with Hearst-Argyle.

McCain is cleaning up more than 3 to 1 among voters who think the country is headed in the right direction, he's ahead 20 points among voters whose personal finances are better off compared to last year, he's clobbering Obama 4 to 1 among voters who think family values are the top issue of the campaign, he's hammering him by 25 points among voters who say foreign policy is the biggest issue, he's beating him 5 to 1 among voters who list illegal immigration as the top issue, and he's winning by more than 20 points among voters who rank taxes as the most important issue.

Good news for McCain? Maybe not! Winning only matters if what you're winning matters too. And in McCain's case, it largely doesn't. In fact as the Franklin & Marshall College Poll also reveals, despite losing on a wide range of usually salient issues, Barack Obama leads John McCain nationally by six percentage points.

McCain is winning the issue battles but losing the electoral war, because the issues he is winning are not the issues most voters care about. Family values, immigration, foreign policy, country on the right track, and better off finances—count McCain a winner. But on the issues voters say are most important to their vote choice this year—the economy, Iraq, and health care—McCain is a big loser.

Math, not politics, matters here. For example, McCain is winning among voters who say the country is moving in the right direction, but such voters make up a paltry 17% of all voters. Similarly, McCain is winning overwhelmingly among voters who say their own finances are better off this year than last, but that's only 15% of all voters.

The results on the issues are similar: foreign policy is a big strength for McCain, but only about five percent of voters rank it most important. Illegal immigration, another strong McCain issue, similarly draws just five percent of voters. Taxes, a perennial GOP winner, is also a winner for McCain, but a scant three percent of voters say it matters most to them.

In sharp contrast, the issues McCain is losing, he is losing big: the economy (20 points), Iraq (24 points), and health care (45 points). Worse for him, these three are the critical issues of the campaign—two of every three voters list one of them as the most important issue this year. And McCain is losing all three of them to Obama.

In the political algebra of 2008 presidential politics, McCain is winning where it matters least while losing where it matters most.

All of this is clear enough in the data. But why is it happening? The clear answer seems to be that the economy has become the dominant issue of the campaign. Not Iraq or immigration or some other issue as once seemed possible, but economic policy increasingly is defining the contours of the race.

Not that it is unusual for the economy to emerge as a major issue in presidential contests. Indeed, it would be unusual for it not to be an issue. This year and this contest; however, seem different. The breadth of anguish expressed by the average voter about the troubled economy is striking. In the recent Franklin & Marshall Poll, almost half of all respondents (42%) say their personal finances are worse this year than last.

Consistent with these individual economic concerns, voters' worries this year are neither abstract nor ambiguous—not angst about macro issues like inflation or even unemployment—but rather intense personal concern about how they and their families can cope on a daily basis with the economic pressures upon them.

Thus emerging into the race are the "kitchen table issues," best defined as the sort of everyday concerns that confront ordinary folks on a daily basis. Traditional economic issues tend to the abstract: inflation rates, unemployment numbers, GDP growth, and the fluctuations of the stock market. But kitchen table issues comprise the concrete: bill paying, food purchases, tuition bills, vacation plans, and family health care coverage.

And it is to these kitchen table issues that the 2008 election is increasingly turning. Just how powerfully the ongoing economic turmoil has walloped family resources can be seen in some very personal information reported in the Franklin & Marshall College Poll. When asked about economic hardships in the last twelve months, one in four voters said they lacked health insurance, one in five had their pay cut, one in five couldn't afford to pay for medical treatment or afford to buy gas, and one in six couldn't afford to buy food. Overall more than half (52%) of respondents reported experiencing at least one significant financial hardship at some point during the past year.

How might this all play out in November? Few forecasters now expect an early end to the current economic turmoil. Any turnaround might take a year or longer. So kitchen table issues are likely to remain the driving issues in the campaign.

So far they are boosting Obama. Earlier challengers have similarly benefited from them. In the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan used bad economic times to dampen the fears some voters had about him and his policies on Social Security and the Cold War. In 1992 voters came to believe that George H. W. Bush simply did not understand or appreciate the depths of their apprehension over the economy. Bill Clinton used this fear to overcome questions about his character.

So Obama, in the tradition of Reagan and Clinton before him, now stands most to benefit from the shift to kitchen table issues. Voters seem prepared to suppress any doubts about Obama as they did about Reagan and Clinton in order to get the change they want.

Nevertheless, McCain cannot be counted out. This is still a close race. After six months of intensive campaigning, some 15% of voters are still undecided. And voters know what they want—they want their economic problems addressed—they want the kitchen table issues put back on the table. More than anything else, Obama leads now precisely because he has done a better job of positioning himself as the candidate who can do just that.

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