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Jobs First/Deficit Reduction Second

The following analysis was written by Bernie **PORN**, president of the Lansing-based polling firm of EPIC/MRA.

This fifth in a series of commentaries focuses on recent national polls that test voter opinion on the national economy. Obviously, improving the economy and providing jobs is the overriding national issue that will drive voter opinion on the election choices facing voters in 2010.

Do voters think it is more important to create jobs and reduce unemployment, even if it means there will be a higher short-term deficit, or, is it more important to reduce the federal deficit, even if that means higher short-term unemployment? Moreover, what are some of the specific proposals to create jobs and reduce the deficit that voters support the most?

Polls clearly show there is growing discontent with the direction the country's taking. Based on the average results from all public polls (Real Clear Politics) as of Jan. 10, a 57 percent to 36 percent majority said the country is headed "seriously off on the wrong track," and in terms of the top issue concern, 47 percent in the most recent CBS News poll cited the "economy and jobs" as their top issue concern in an open ended question, followed by "health care" at 12 percent. In Michigan, the percentage citing the economy and jobs in EPIC-MRA polling is almost identical to national polls, but education funding was cited as a second top issue in December by 19 percent.

When the polling firm of Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner recently asked 1000 likely 2010 voters which two economic problems from a rotated list were the most important ones facing the country right now, "unemployment is very high" was cited by 64 percent, followed by "the budget deficits are very big" and "health care costs are way up" at 29 percent each, with 23 percent citing "taxes are too high," and 22 percent citing "wages and salaries are down while costs rise."

Regardless of party, voters are putting job creation ahead of deficit reduction

Again, the Greenberg poll showed that a solid 68 percent majority of all voters nationwide (51 percent strongly) say that "right now, it is more important to create jobs and reduce unemployment, even if it means a higher short-term deficit," while only 27 percent agreed that "right now, it is more important to reduce the deficit, even if that means higher short-term unemployment." This view is strongly held by voters from all political parties, including 79 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of Independent voters, and 58 percent of Republican voters.

A CNN poll in December showed similar results. Half of the sample said by a 57 percent majority that it was more important for the Obama Administration to "stimulate economic recovery, even if it might mean less deficit reduction," with 40 percent saying it is more important to "reduce the deficit, even if it might slow economic recovery." Among the other half of the sample, a 74 percent majority said it is more important for the Obama Administration to "create more jobs even if it means less deficit reduction," while 25 percent said it is more important to "reduce the deficit even if unemployment remains high."

Americans split on whether economy is better or worse than six months ago

A 45 percent plurality of likely 2010 national voters in the Greenberg poll said the economy is better than it was six months ago, while 42 percent say it is worse. In a year from now, a 61 percent majority said the economy will be better off than it is now, while 27 percent said it will be worse off.

On personal finances, a 50 percent majority said they and their family are "worse off financially" than they were a year ago, with 27 percent saying they were "better off." A 53 percent majority said that in a year from now, they and their families will be "better off," with 27 percent saying they will be "worse off."

A 36 percent plurality said the economy "has already bottomed out and is starting to improve," 33 percent said it "has not bottomed out yet," and 26 percent said the economy "is at the bottom but is not yet getting any better." This view of the economy in the Greenberg national survey is unchanged from the results of the same question in July of 2009.

Bush more responsible than Obama for the current state of the economy and the budget deficit

By a 55 to 31 percent majority, American voters say that former President Bush, instead of President Obama, is more responsible for the current state of the economy, and by a similar 57 to 34 percent majority, they believe Bush is more responsible for the current budget deficit than Obama, including 30 percent of Republicans who share that view.

While voters may still hold President Bush responsible for creating the problem, voters have their doubts about whether the economic policies of Obama will work in the solving the problem. A 50 to 44 percent majority say that Obama's policies "have run up a deficit while failing to end the recession or slow job losses, rather than help avert an even worse crisis and lay the foundation for an eventual recovery." If during the coming months, there are signs of an economic recovery taking hold, that view could change.

Voters hopeful about the future

In the CNN survey, a 69 percent majority said they are "more hopeful about what the new year holds in store for them personally," while 30 percent said they are "more fearful." They are not as hopeful about the rest of the world. A narrow 51 percent majority of American voters said they are "more hopeful about what the new year holds in store for the world in general, while 48 percent said they are "more fearful."

According to a nationwide survey conducted by GfK Roper for the AP, 73 percent of all voters said 2009 was a "bad year for the country," while 26 percent said it was a "good year." A 61 percent majority said 2009 was a "good year" for them and their family, while 38 percent said it was a "bad year."

A 72 percent majority in the GfK poll said they were "optimistic about what the year 2010 will bring for the country," while 26 percent said they were "pessimistic." An 82 percent majority said they were "optimistic" about what the year 2010 will bring for them and their family.

What are the job creation, deficit reduction policies that are supported the most by American voters?

According to the most recent Greenberg survey, an 85 percent majority of American voters overwhelmingly support extending unemployment benefits for families that have recently lost their jobs. A 79 percent majority supports passing a new job creation tax credit for businesses that create jobs in the United States in the next two years. A 73 percent majority supports enacting an immediate and broad range of cuts in federal spending to reduce the deficit.

A 72 percent majority supports "developing an infrastructure bank modeled after development banks around the world to provide loans to invest over 10 years in infrastructure and transportation, clean energy and other areas to create jobs." A 71 percent majority supports putting unemployed people back to work at government-funded public service jobs that meet important community needs."

A 70 percent majority supports "developing a green bank to open new credit market and provide stable financing businesses to invest in new alternative and efficient energy technologies to create jobs." A 65 percent majority supports "providing increased federal assistance to state and local governments to prevent additional layoffs of government employees like teachers, police and firefighters."

A 64 percent majority said they support creating a deficit reduction commission that would provide recommendations of ways to cut the deficit, which would have to be quickly passed or rejected by the House or Senate as a package. A 59 percent majority supports cutting tax rates this year for all taxpayers and cutting corporate taxes to stimulate consumption and investment.