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MIRS Capitol Capsule, Monday, February 6, 2012

Heading Into Feb. 28 -- Obama Leads By 8

The following is a monthly commentary provided by Bernie **PORN**, president of the Lansing-based polling firm of EPIC/MRA. This month, Porn takes a look at the status of a possible general election matchup between Mitt **ROMNEY** the likely GOP nominee and President Barack **OBAMA**.

Throughout 2011, former Gov. Mitt Romney led President Barack Obama in the presidential race between 2 and 5 percentage points. Last month, EPIC-MRA conducted two statewide surveys, both of which showing Obama leading Romney for the first time.

In the first, the President is up 3 points, 43 to 40 percent, including a direct vote for Obama of 38 percent with 5 percent undecided at first, but when pressed, said they lean toward Obama. The direct vote for Romney was 31 percent with 9 percent who were undecided at first, but said they lean toward Romney.

In the second, which followed the Jan. 21 South Carolina primary where Newt **GINGRICH** won convincingly over Romney, Obama extended his lead from 3 to 8 points, 48 percent for Obama to 40 percent for Romney. This included a direct vote of 46 percent for Obama with another 2 percent leaning toward him, to 36 percent for Romney with 4 percent leaning his way. Obama leads Gingrich by a 51 to 38 percent majority.

The change in voter opinion was mostly among independent voters, who supported Romney throughout 2011, but have now moved toward Obama. Independent voters support Obama over Romney by 12 points overall, 44 to 32 percent with 26 percent of independent voters undecided. Obama leads among independent men by 6 points, 41 to 35 percent, but his lead mostly comes from independent women, who support Obama by 21 points, 48 to 27 percent. Obama leads among Democrats by a 90 to 6 percent majority, while Romney leads among Republicans 82 to 7 percent, with 11 percent undecided.

Belief In Improved Economy Helps Obama

Nearly half of all voters, 49 percent, said the Michigan economy has already bottomed out and is starting to improve. Another 30 percent in the most recent poll said the economy is at the bottom but not yet improving, with 19 percent saying the economy has not yet bottomed out and will still get worse.

Among the 49 percent who say the economy is improving, Obama has a 59 to 36 percent favorable rating, with only a narrow 51 to 49 percent giving him a negative job rating. Meanwhile, Romney's personal favorability/unfavorable rating is tied at 43 percent.

Obama leads Romney among voters who say the economy is improving, 52 to 40 percent. Among these same voters, Obama leads Gingrich, 57 to 36 percent. Among voters who say the economy is at the bottom but not getting better, Romney leads by one point (44 to 43 percent). Among those who say the economy will get worse, Obama leads 45 to 38 percent. Obama leads Gingrich by 44 to 42 percent among voters who say the economy has not improved, while leading Gingrich among voters who say it will get worse by 49 to 37 percent.

Obama Being Helped By Messy GOP Primary Battle

The war the Republican presidential hopefuls are waging against themselves is hurting each of them. In Oct. 2011, a 40 to 34 percent plurality of Michigan voters had a favorable opinion of Romney. In Nov. 2011, there was little change (39 to 35 percent). In January, 43 percent had an unfavorable opinion of Romney, while favorable rating remained at 39 percent.

Gingrich has gone from a 44-to-37 percent unfavorable rating in November, to a 53-to-32 percent unfavorable rating in January. Ron **PAUL** is at 37 percent unfavorable/32 percent favorable. Rick **SANTORUM** is 35 percent unfavorable/33 percent favorable.

Before the Jan. 21 South Carolina primary, Romney led with 34 percent, Gingrich (17 percent), Santorum (16 percent) and Paul (11 percent). In the second January poll, support for Romney slipped by three points to 31 percent, Gingrich improved by 8 points to 25 percent, followed by Ron Paul at 14 percent and Rick Santorum at 10 percent, with 19 percent undecided.

Gingrich improved his position in our January Michigan survey just from the news coverage of his South Carolina victory. However, since that poll, negative TV ads have been running against Gingrich in Michigan by the independent committee supporting Romney, and Romney won the Florida primary over Gingrich by 14 points, 46 to 32 percent.

It is very likely that Romney will win Michigan convincingly unless he makes a mistake that further damages his image. Romney's verbal blunders, such as saying that he is "not concerned about the poor," or his comments that seem awkward at best about his wealth and the issue of taxes on the wealthy, and his 14 percent effective tax rate. The fact Gingrich is not aggressively campaigning in Michigan benefits Romney.

Obama Wins If Ron Paul Runs As An Independent?

Another survey result not released was a possible three-way matchup with Paul running as an independent. That three-way matchup was only tested with Obama and Gingrich, and not with Romney. Under that scenario, it's Obama 45 percent, Gingrich 30 percent, and 16 percent with 9 percent undecided. That's a drop of 6 points for Obama and an 8 point drop for Gingrich. Without Paul, Obama leads Gingrich, 51 to 38 percent.

Obama gets 88 percent of Democrats while Gingrich gets only 66 percent of Republicans, with Paul getting 18 percent of the GOP vote. Among independents, Obama leads with 35 percent, followed by Paul at 31 percent, with Gingrich getting only 16 percent.

The reason Paul does well as an independent is that he has much higher favorability ratings among independent voters than among Republicans. While Republicans have an unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul (46 to 34 percent), a 45 percent plurality of independent voters has a favorable opinion of him (30 percent unfavorable). Among independent men, a 50 percent bare majority has a favorable opinion of Paul.

It is pretty clear that Bill **CLINTON** would probably not have won in 1992 if it were not for the third party candidacy of Ross **PEROT**, and if Paul were to run as a third party independent candidate, he would likely have the same impact on the race, at least in Michigan and probably throughout the country, as well.

Snyder Helped By Improving Michigan Economy

Gov. Rick **SNYDER**'s personal favorability rating has improved somewhat from 39 percent favorable in November to 46 percent now (up 7 points), with his unfavorable rating slipping from 44 to 40 percent. At the same time, Snyder's job rating went from 59 percent negative in November to 54 percent negative, with his positive job rating improving by 4 points, from 37 to 41 percent.

Survey respondents were asked if the first year of the Snyder administration has made Michigan a better place or worse place to live. The largest percentage, 44 percent, said things were no different. Another 31

percent said things are better and 23 percent said things are worse.

However, there is a significant partisan divide, as well as a significant divide between GOP men and women. Among all Democrats, 48 percent said there has been no difference, 37 percent said things are worse, with 12 percent saying things are better. Among Independent voters, a 53 percent majority said Snyder's administration has made no difference, 27 percent said things are better, with 17 percent saying things are worse. Among all Republicans, a 54 percent majority said life is better, 37 percent said the same, with 9 percent saying worse.

However, among Republicans, there is a huge difference among men and women. GOP men say life is better by a 66 percent majority, with 31 percent saying there is no difference and only 2 percent saying things are worse. Among GOP women, only 43 percent said life is better, 42 percent said there is no difference, and 15 percent said things are worse. That represents a 23 percent difference between Republican men and women.

Assuming that the economy in Michigan continues to improve, it is very likely that Snyder will benefit both in terms of his favorability and job rating numbers, notwithstanding the fact that his business tax cuts that just took effect and could not have had a significant impact yet on the job situation.