

A version of this memo appeared in the January 19th edition of National Review Online. You can find the article here: [link](#).

A First Glance at the New Political Landscape

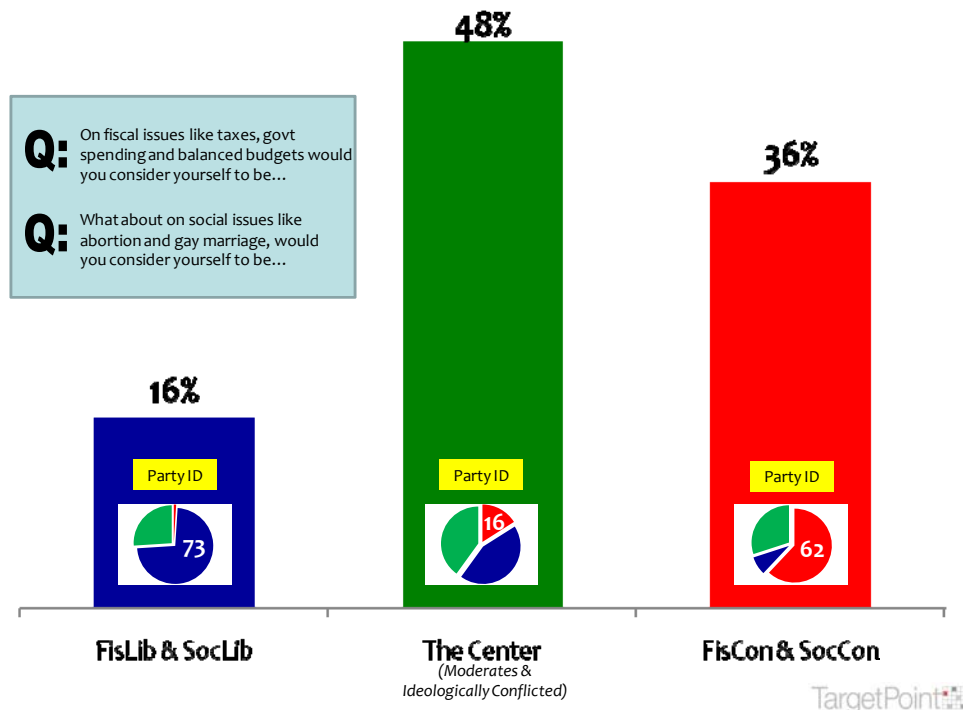
Before our descent into the political wilderness, as Republicans we must survey the contours, pathways and ridgelines of our map back to power. To date, there have been a number of valuable post-election analyses, helping us answer the question, “What just happened?” We have learned much from them, but the path forward remains only dimly lit. With the new year upon us, it is time for Republicans to pivot forward and ask ourselves, “What next?”

To answer that question, my firm, TargetPoint Consulting, conducted a national post-election survey of 1,024 registered voters, assessing where the electorate stands on those issues most likely to be a part of the Obama administration’s legislative and political agenda. The survey, which was paid for by TargetPoint as an independent research project, was fielded November 20-24 via the Internet using YouGov/Polimetrix’s PollingPoint panel, and has a margin of sampling error of +/-3%. Key findings from the survey follow, providing the conservative community with a first glance at the new political landscape we face.

Are We Still a Center-Right Nation?

We sought first to deal with the question of ideology – the election of Barack Obama and increased Democratic congressional majorities has forced us to reevaluate our nation’s political ideology. Does our vote reveal an actual leftward drift in our ideals, or are we still a center-right nation that simply grew weary of our current Republican representation in Washington?

To better capture the ideological nuance of the electorate, the standard ideology survey question can be split into two parts, one on fiscal issues (i.e., taxes, spending, and balanced budgets) and the other on social issues (i.e., abortion and gay marriage). The two are then combined for a deeper sense of our ideological composition.



While we are in fact a center-right nation, it is too little acknowledged just how large that “center” is. Nearly half (48%) of the country falls into that broad center, comprised either of those that are moderates on both fiscal and social issues, or those that are ideologically “conflicted.” Another 36% are classified as Core Conservatives, identifying themselves as both fiscal and social conservatives, while a marginal 16% end up as Core Liberals, self-identifying as a liberal on both fiscal and social issues.

Republican partisan identification in the Center is abysmally low, with only 18% aligning themselves with the party (versus 40% Democrat and 44% Independent). John McCain mustered only 28% of the Center's vote – and while it is not necessary that Republicans outright win the center to win elections, at least 38%-40% is necessary to remain competitive.

So while Republicans have a respectable hold on the Right (62% of Core Conservatives identifying as Republican and 89% voting for McCain), we are completely adrift in the Center. The Grand Old Party has ceded the Center – nearly half of this country – to the Democrats, leaving itself a party of only the Right in a Center-Right nation.

The fix, however, is not *necessarily* moderation. Indeed, mainstream Republicanism generally aligns with the center-right electorate. Rather, it is the tone, tenor, and volume of our messaging that we believe has alienated the Center. We should therefore first modernize our message through recalibration and then look at opportunities for moderation with minimal base defection.

Representing the Middle Class

Republicans must acknowledge another stark reality of the 2008 election: we have lost the middle class voter. And not only did we lose their vote, we have lost any meaningful, credible connection we once had with the middle class, effectively relinquishing it to the Democratic party.

We base this upon a series of open-ended questions probing what voters liked most and least about each of the parties. Responses to what the electorate liked best about the Democratic Party are displayed below in a Word Cloud, a visualization in which the size of the word is directly related to its frequency in the text data.

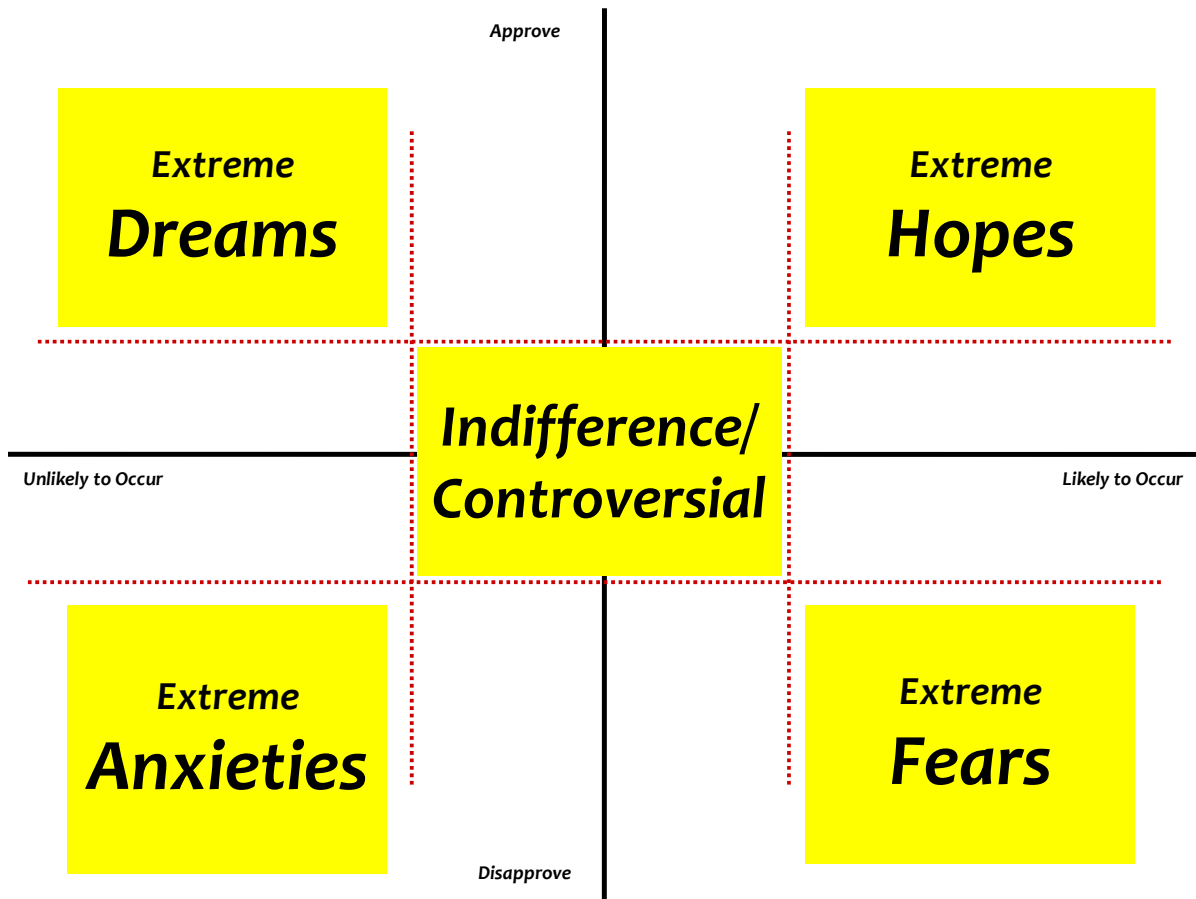
- 1) common-sense issues in which we can work together with President Obama to get things done in a meaningful, prompt, and pragmatic way;
- 2) issues within which we can seek legislative compromises, making bills better and more conservative, and finally
- 3) issues on which Republicans will take bold stands of principled opposition.

Our research provides us with some distributive direction. Survey respondents were shown statements outlining nearly 40 different legislative items, actions, and outcomes. For each one we asked two questions: do you approve or disapprove of this (0-10 scale), and how likely do you think this is to happen (0 meaning “not at all likely” and 10 meaning “extremely likely”)?

We can then plot each of these on a Cartesian graph, using the Likelihood as the horizontal X axis and Approval as the vertical Y axis, visually rendering our new political landscape. We then categorize each quadrant:

HOPES (*upper-right quadrant*): “I approve of the item and I believe it is likely to happen”
 DREAMS (*upper-left*): “I approve of the item but I believe it is NOT likely to happen”
 FEARS (*lower-right*): “I disapprove of the item and I believe it is likely to happen”
 ANXIETIES (*lower-left*): “I disapprove of the item but I believe it is NOT likely to happen”

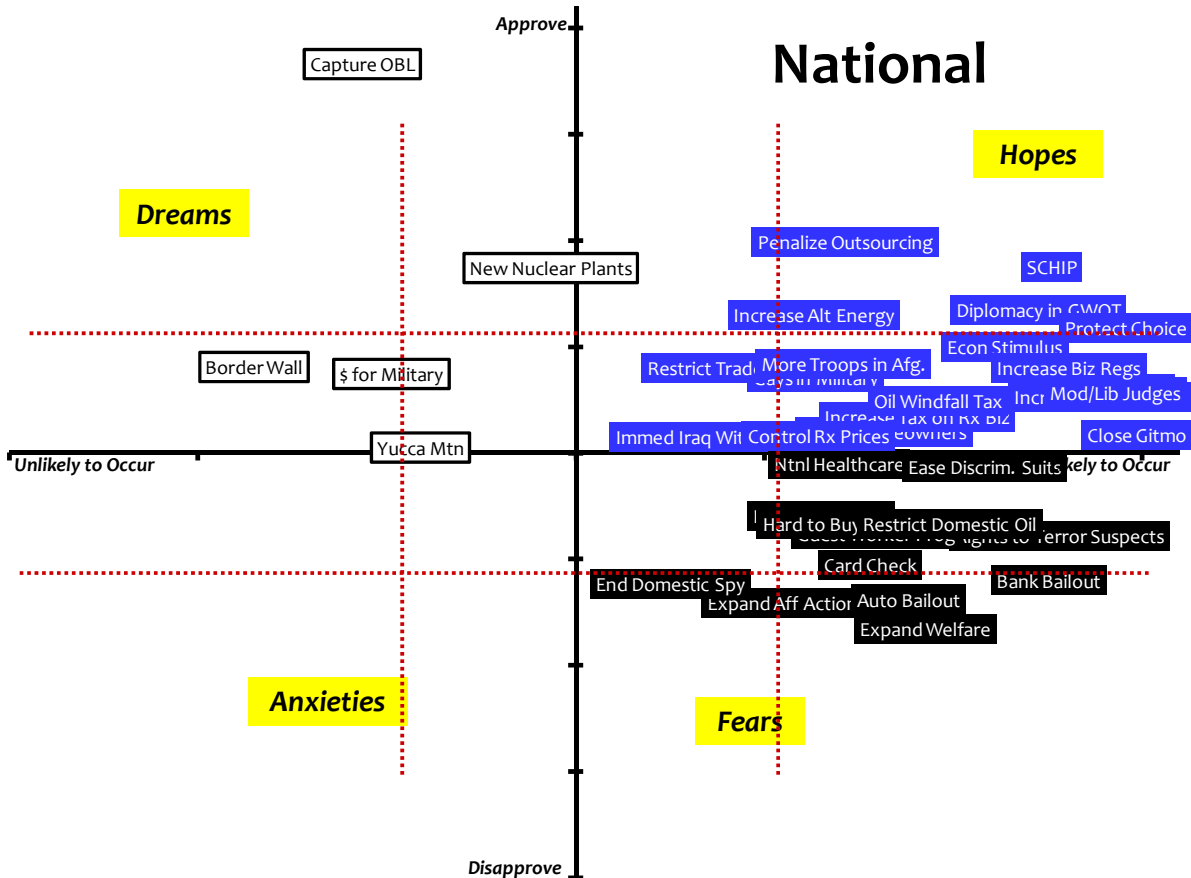
Moreover, using standard deviations, we can identify items with “extreme” values – those that people are especially approving (or disapproving) of, and items which voters believe extremely likely (or unlikely) to occur. These boundaries and definitions are detailed in the legend below, followed by the actual results for the national electorate.



(Please note that rather than the summary boxes you see, we tested a full sentence detailing each piece of legislation while also trying to keep the wording informative and fair).

National

We are a nation of Hopes and Fears, with only a handful of Dreams. The Dreams, deemed unlikely to occur under Obama, are mostly “conservative” ones, with the exception of the capture of Osama Bin Laden: we approve of the construction of a wall on the Mexican border and increased military spending but we are skeptical of their likelihood; and new nuclear plants have high approval, while their precondition, Yucca Mountain, is much more controversial.

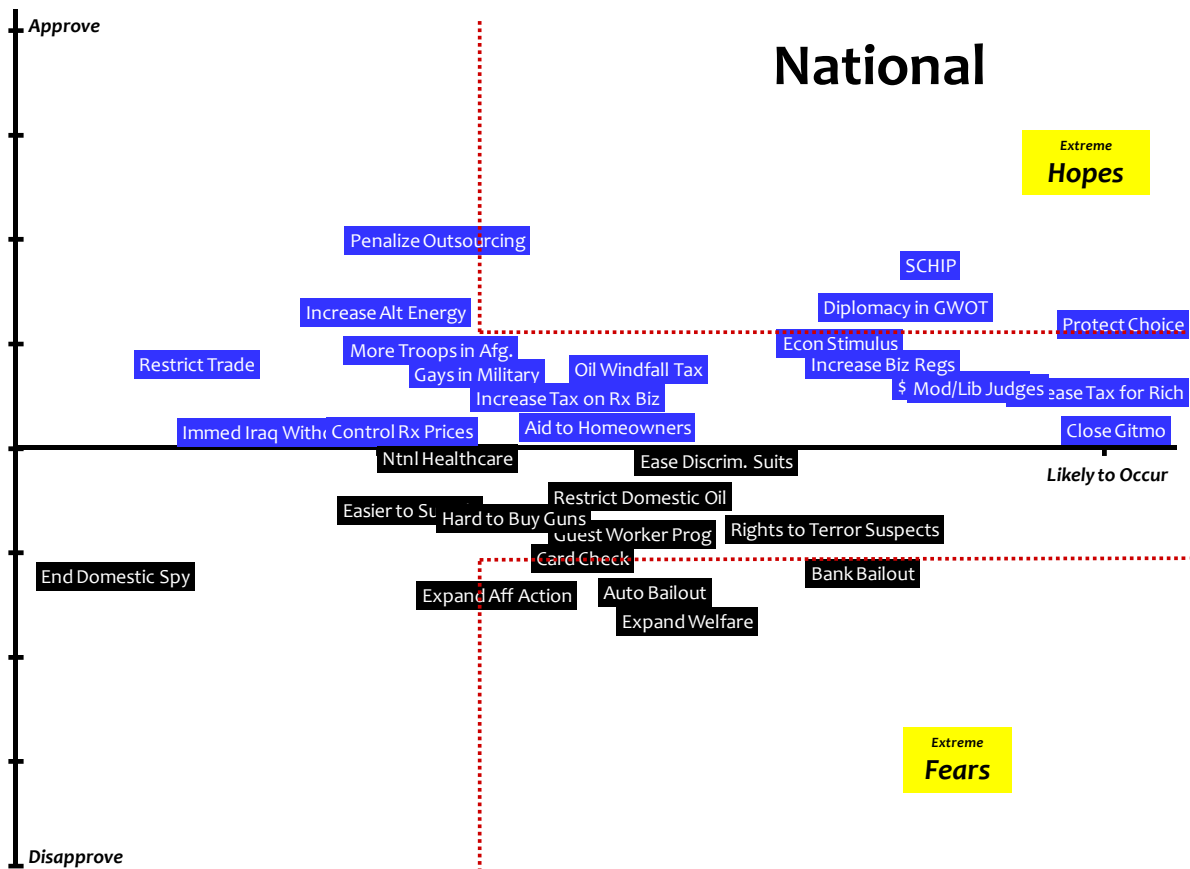


Next, we zoom in on our nation's Hopes and Fears, identifying a handful of issues that fall into the "extreme" categories. Americans are extremely hopeful about:

- "Expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program, to allow the government to provide more children with healthcare."
- "Increasing the use of diplomacy in the war on terror."
- "Protecting a woman's right to choose."

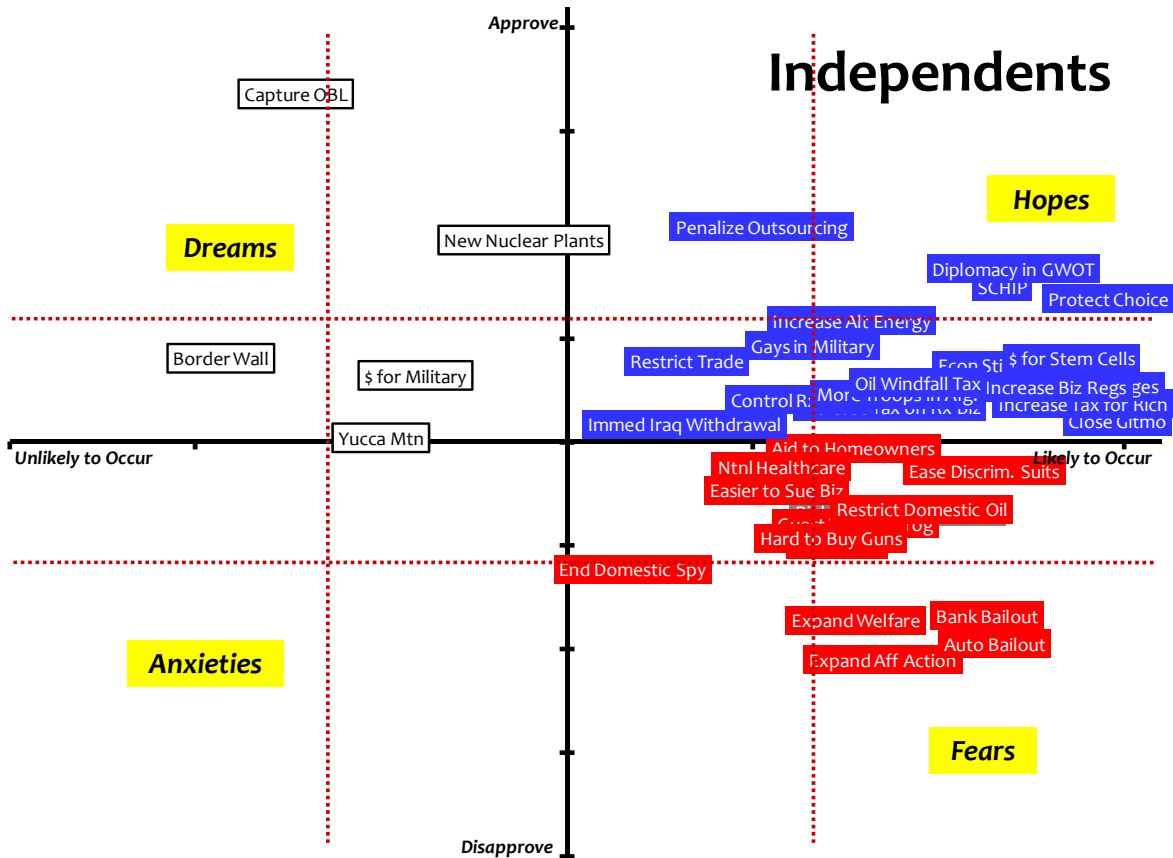
In turn, voters are extremely fearful of:

- "Expansion of affirmative action programs."
- "The expansion of welfare programs."
- "Providing government loans and financial aid to the auto industry to prevent bankruptcy and job loss."
- "Providing financial aid and loans to banks and financial companies to stabilize the economy."
- "Making it easier for unions to organize by eliminating secret ballots in union elections."



Independents

Next, we focus on the same plots by partisanship, looking first at Independents, the partisan group most similar to the national electorate. In fact, there is only one marginal difference: Card Check no longer qualifies as an extreme fear, though it is still decisively in the fear category.



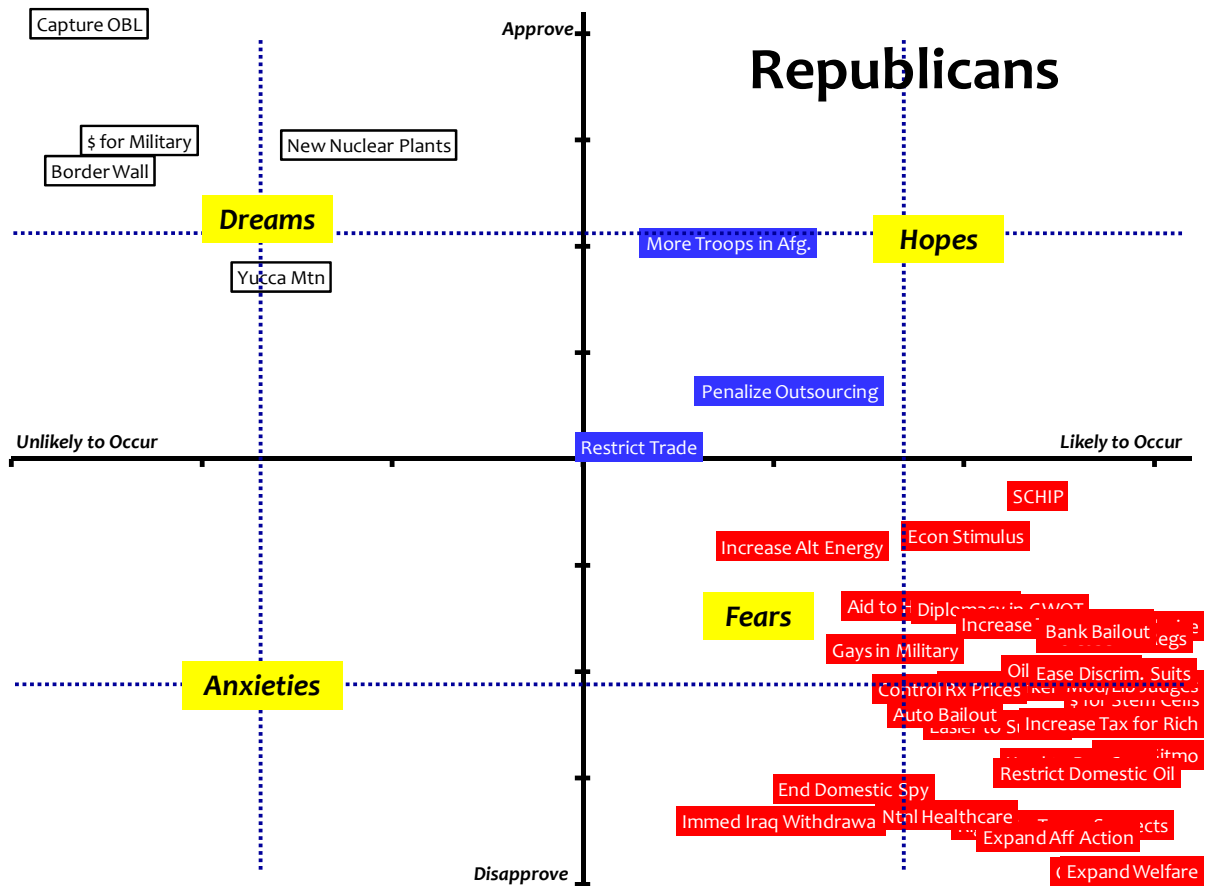
Also, note the position of National Healthcare (“creating a government-run national healthcare program”) in the fear quadrant, though only by a hair. Independent reaction here is incredibly mixed, averaging out to a fear while responses depend largely upon ideology.

Republicans

Republicans are filled with fears of the Obama agenda, but before we consider them, we must attend to two caution flags raised in the Hopes quadrant:

- “Penalizing companies that send jobs overseas.”
- “Increasing barriers and restrictions on trade with foreign countries.”

There has always been a protectionist, America-first streak in the Republican party, although free-traders have typically been the majority. Our survey data indicates this is no longer the case, and free trade advocates should be worried.

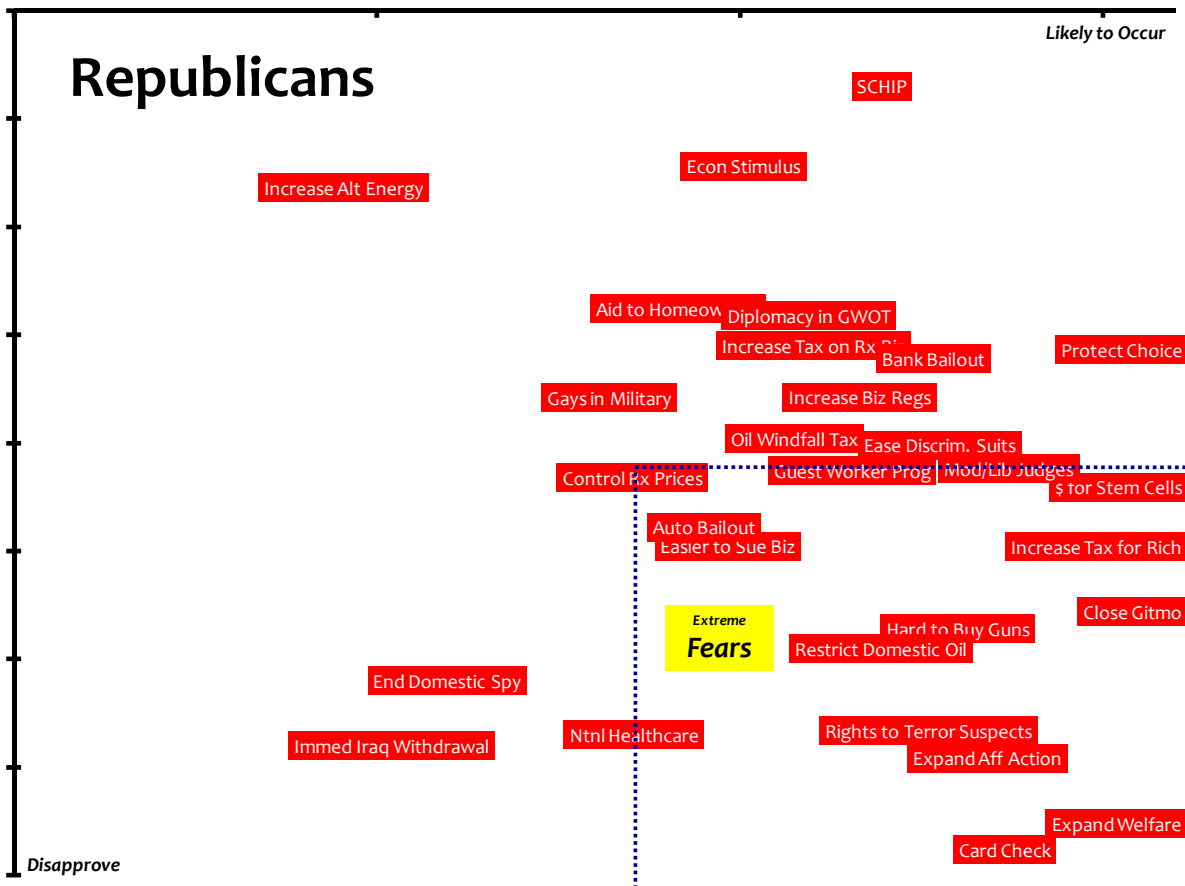


Concentrating on Republican Fears, the base expects much. The extreme Fears from the national grid reappear, as do a number of other fine candidates for principled GOP opposition in the 111th Congress:

- “Ensuring the civil liberties of terror suspects by trying them in civilian courts instead of military ones.”
- “The closure of the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay.”
- “Making it harder to legally purchase and use firearms.”
- “Restricting oil and gas exploration in Alaska and off the US coast.”

Consider also those items that have drifted closest to the Hopes quadrant, indicating that the base appears to be either warming up, or perhaps resigning itself to its inevitability.

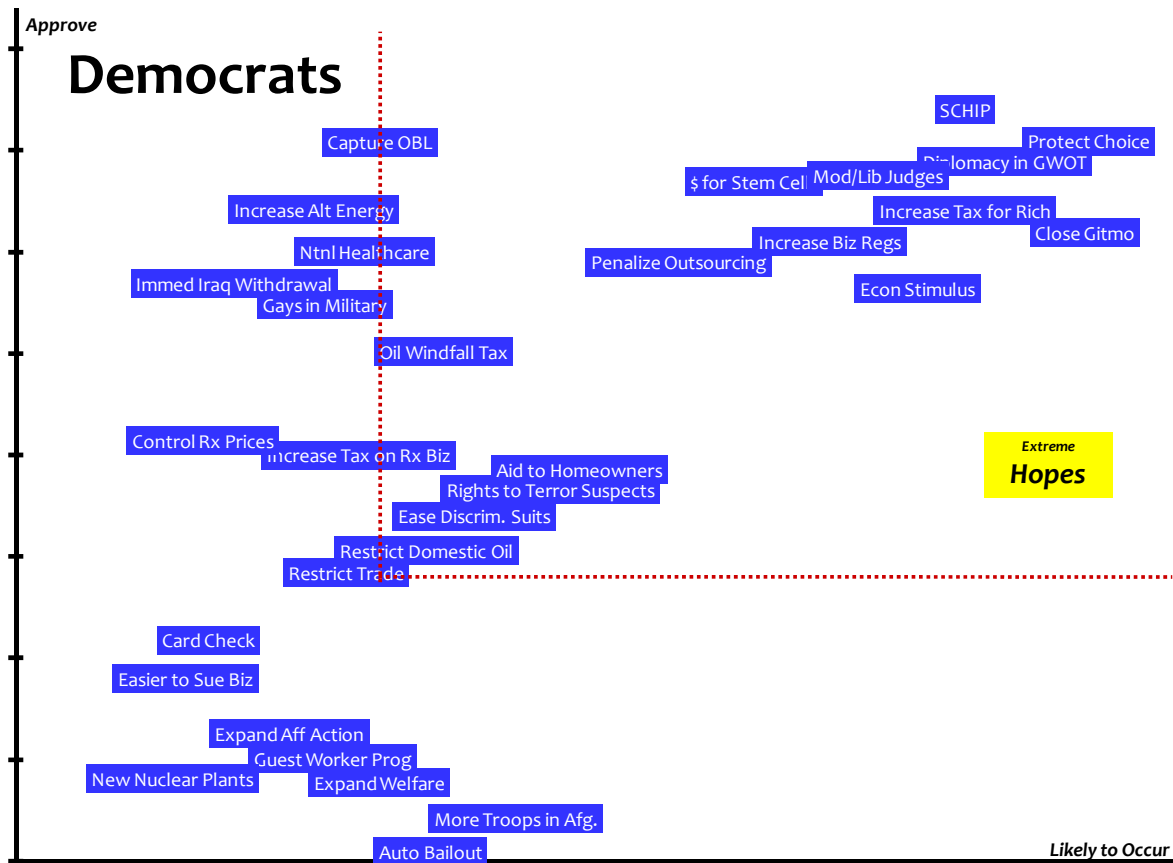
- “Requiring electric power companies to switch from oil and coal to wind, solar, and other alternative power.”
- “Passing a major economic stimulus package.”
- SCHIP expansion.



Democrats

Finally, Democrats are bullish about nearly everything – even capturing Osama Bin Laden! Still, underneath this sometime irrational exuberance, we see the pressure Barack Obama can expect from the left:

- “The appointment of more moderate and progressive judges in the federal courts.”
- “Increased government funding of stem cell research.”
- “Increasing regulations on American business corporations.”
- Tax increases for the rich
- The closure of Guantanamo Bay



Beyond that, there are also some interesting instances of indifference:

- National Healthcare lies outside the extreme box, though not for lack of approval; even Democrats are hesitant to say that reform is very likely to happen.
- On Card Check both approval and likelihood are understated, indicating hesitation among Democrats about this legislation.

Moving Forward

Earlier advice was to separate the Obama agenda into three distinct areas: common-sense cooperation, conservative compromises, and principled opposition. The visualizations above provide guidance toward a preliminary partition:

- 1) **Pass SCHIP:** It is an extreme national Hope, with both Democrats and Independents approving of it and deeming it very likely to occur. Even Republicans are lukewarm to it and resigned to its passage. Unfortunately, its inevitability may only embolden Republicans to take a principled stand against it, as it “won’t cost them anything.” Sadly, it would. No matter how loudly we shout “Tax Increase!” or “Welfare!” or “Slippery Slope!” a No vote would only be seen as a vote against kids and against the middle class.
- 2) **Force a hard compromise on healthcare reform:** Republicans loathe it, Independents, though they want it, are wary of it, and Democrats are not all that convinced it will actually happen. We should be using that hesitation to force hard conservative compromises on a healthcare reform that will almost certainly pass one way or the other.
- 3) **Stand up to Card Check:** Nationally, there is great fear of this legislation, with Independents and Republicans alike deeply concerned that it will happen; Democratic support is fractured and hesitant. Furthermore, the debate over the auto bailout has placed the relationship between Democrats, President-elect Obama and organized labor under the microscope. Taken all together this represents an ideal opportunity to please the base, appeal to Independents, and call out Democratic attempts to over-reach on their agenda.

Even then, above and beyond the Obama agenda, there is much more to think about as we chart our course forward. Consider just a handful of remaining questions that were also tested in this study:

- The composition of the Center: What is their ideology and where do they stand on these issues?
- The state of the Republican Brand: What is it the electorate likes most and least about the Republican Party? How does that vary by partisanship?
- The ideological trajectory of the Republican Party: Should the GOP become more conservative or more moderate? Are there independents that want a more conservative party?

The next few months are critical to the long-term viability of the Republican Party. How we respond to the Obama agenda will largely dictate our ability to recover in 2010, 2012, and onward. We now face a new year, new president, new congress and a radically reoriented political landscape – here’s hoping that we now have some sense of how to navigate this new world.

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