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Ideal Candidate is an Oxymoron

“Oxymoron” sounds like something Mitt Romney and Texas Gov. Rick Perry have been calling each other. But it’s not an insult. It’s a contradiction in terms—like “working vacation.” It may be the key to victory next year.

For Democrats, oxymoron means a tough liberal. President Barack Obama toughened up his image with the drone assassination of Al Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki, as well as the assault on Osama bin Laden. This gives Democrats hope that maybe, just maybe, Obama can pull through in 2012—despite a deteriorating economy and sagging job ratings.

**“Tough Liberals
and nice
Conservatives win.”**

For Republicans, oxymoron means a nice conservative. Many thought New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was the answer to their prayers. But he didn’t fit the bill. Christie is a tough guy. Even a bully. But a nice guy? Not so much.

The rap on Obama is that he’s too weak and accommodating. Not enough backbone. Every time he makes a deal with Republicans—like the deal to raise the debt ceiling this summer—his opponents take him to the cleaners. When the Republican Congress threatened to let the government go into default, Obama didn’t call their bluff. It was too risky. A Pew poll asks, “Does Barack Obama impress you as a strong leader?” In February

2009, 77% said yes. In August, that number had dropped to 49%.

In the old days, Democrats had plenty of tough liberals, like Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. They were Big Government liberals. But they were all tough guys. Defy them, and you’d pay a price.

FDR went after his enemies with gusto. “They are unanimous in their hate for me,” FDR delighted, “and I welcome their hatred!” In the middle of the Korean War, Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur for insubordination. If you crossed Kennedy, his brother Bobby would come after you. Defy LBJ, and you’d wake up in the morning missing an important body part. Those old-fashioned Democrats were not to be trifled with.

Since LBJ, however, Democrats have had a problem finding tough liberals. George McGovern? He was “1,000 percent” behind his running mate—just before he dropped him from the ticket. Walter Mondale? He got pushed around by the special interests. Michael Dukakis? He got beaten up by “the wimp.” Voters elected Jimmy Carter after Watergate because the country was looking for a preacher. So we elected one and discovered he wasn’t tough enough for the job.

In the 1970s, Democrats longed for “another Kennedy” to save them. But Ted Kennedy proved a flawed candidate. In the 1980s, many Democrats envisioned New York Gov. Mario Cuomo as their savior—a tough, compassionate, street-smart liberal. But Cuomo

could never decide whether to enter the race.

Bill Clinton proved he was tough in 1992. He faced down the press in the controversies over Gennifer Flowers and his draft record. He stood up to Jesse Jackson and the Democratic Party's black constituency with the Sister Souljah affair. Then he called Speaker Newt Gingrich's bluff when the Republican Congress shut down the federal government. Clinton won two terms—the first Democrat to do so since Roosevelt.

So what can Democrats say to prove Obama's a tough guy? Two things: bin Laden and al-Awlaki. Obama brushed aside all the hand-wringing over Pakistani sensibilities. He went in and took bin Laden out. Last week, he dismissed the legal reservations about targeting a U.S. citizen. He sent drones over Yemen and took out al-Awlaki.

Will this be enough to save Obama's re-election? That's not clear. But you can be sure the Obama campaign will do all it can to keep public attention focused on those stories.

Republicans have a different problem. The stereotype of conservatives is mean and nasty. Think Jesse Helms, Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, Rush Limbaugh, Dick Cheney; Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) shouting, "You lie!" at Obama during a 2009 speech to Congress, and members of the audience at a GOP debate booing a gay U.S. soldier.

Ronald Reagan defied this stereotype. He was a sunny, nice conservative. He often said harsh, divisive things. But in the end, voters knew Reagan wouldn't start a war or throw old people out in the snow. With House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) or Perry—well, you can't be sure.

Fully half of all tea party Republicans describe themselves as "very angry," according to a CNN poll. All that anger is turning off moderate voters and splitting the GOP.

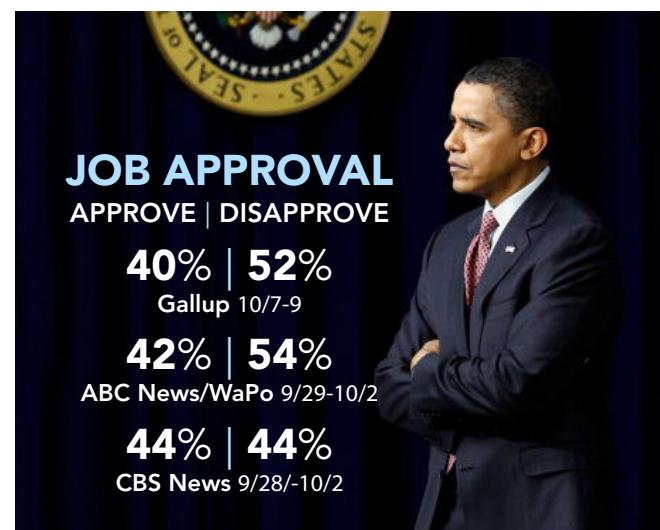
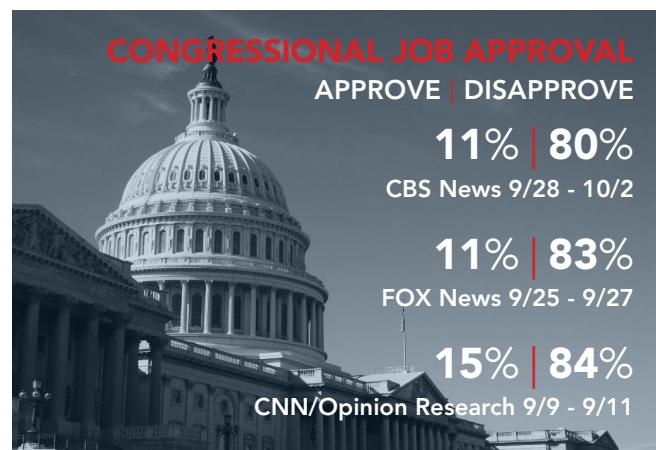
Republican debates reflect the anger. When the moderator observed that, under Perry, Texas has executed 234 death-row inmates, the audience applauded.

Romney is the ruthless corporate raider. The Romney campaign is pummeling Perry with a constant barrage of attacks like "Perry's Problem With the Truth."

Perry is the mean Texas hombre. Remember George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism"? Perry dismisses it in his book, "Fed Up!" as "sending the wrong signal" that conservatism was "flawed and had to be rebranded."

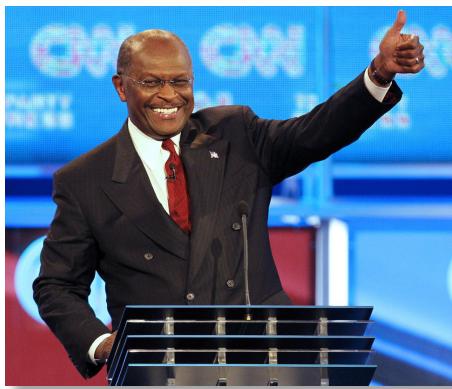
A politician, it has been observed, spends the first half of his career trying to establish who he is—and the second half arguing, "I'm not who you think I am."

We're going to see a lot of candidates try to turn themselves into oxymorons next year. Because tough liberals and nice conservatives win. ■



Will Cain Mutiny?

The Chinese have a saying: If you sit by the river long enough, sooner or later the bodies of all your enemies will come floating by, one by one. That's how Mitt Romney will win the Republican nomination. Romney has run either first or second in every Republican poll since last spring. The bodies of his closest competitors have all come floating by: Donald Trump, Sarah Palin, Chris Christie, Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, and sooner or later, Herman Cain.



There's one remaining question: Will Romney win the nomination the easy way or the hard way? The easy way means Romney wins several early primaries (New Hampshire, Florida, Michigan), support for the other contenders dries up, and they concede the race to Romney.

The hard way means the Tea Party refuses to accept Romney and continues to oppose him, week after week. One Tea Party group has already announced plans to run anti-Romney ads in the early primary and caucus states. The group's spokesman calls Romney a "RINO" (Republican-in-Name-Only) and says that "on almost every single important issue facing America today, Mitt Romney has fought against conservatives and Republicans."

It may actually be better for Romney to win the hard way. He will look like a more formidable candidate and have stronger appeal to moderates if he vanquishes the Tea Party.

But there is one big danger: Some Tea Party factions might nominate an independent to run against Romney and Obama in the general election. Someone like Herman Cain, who does not have a political career to protect. The independent won't win. The only votes the independent will get are from Tea Party voters who conclude that Romney is no better than Obama. The end result will be to split the Republican vote and help re-elect President Obama.

But there may be political consultants out there who see an independent presidential campaign as a good way to make money. And take a firm stand on principle, no matter what the consequences.

The Latino Crisis

Where has the Great Recession hit worst?

Latino children.

The number of children living in poverty increased more than twice as fast among Latinos than among whites or African-Americans. The political impact is hard to assess at this point. The Latino poverty crisis could solidify Democratic support in this fast-growing constituency, just as an earlier generation of immigrants rallied to the Democrats in the 1930s.

But a few cautions are in order:

1. President Obama's job approval has dropped below 50% among Latinos in the September Gallup poll. Latinos are very likely critical of Obama for the same reason other voters are. He has not delivered on the economy.
2. There may be a Latino on the 2012 Republican ticket.
3. While Latinos have become the nation's largest minority (16% of the population, compared with 13% for African-Americans), Latinos comprised only 7% of the voters nationwide in 2010 (African-Americans were 11%). What makes Latinos politically important is their concentration in competitive states, like Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado.

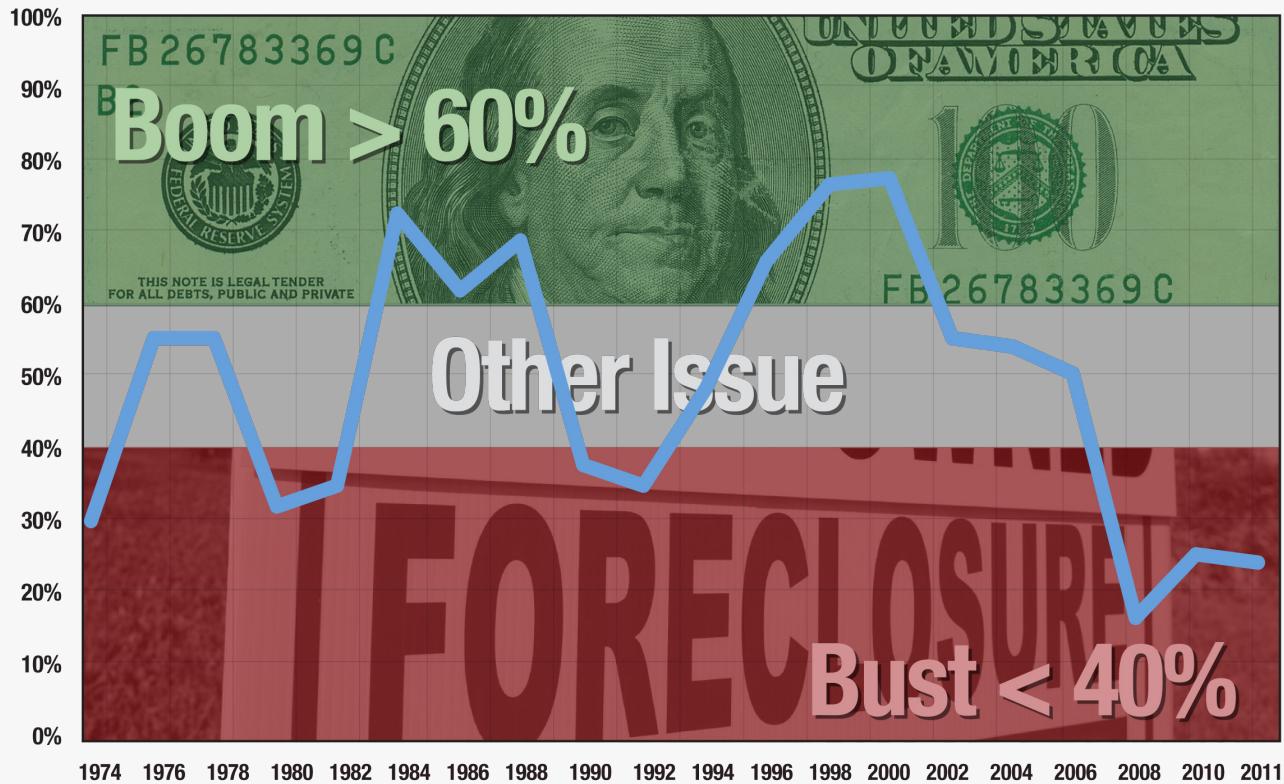
CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

	2007	2010	% Increase
White	4.3M	5M	17.6%
Black	3.9M	4.4M	11.7%
Latino	4.5M	6.1M	36.3%

Pew Hispanic Center 9/28/11

How Well Are Things Going in the Country?

The graph below illustrates how the public feels about the direction of the economy. If over 60% believe the country is "doing well," elections are about a "boom" economy. If under 40% think the country is "doing well," elections are about a "bust" economy. If public opinion falls in the middle, another issue becomes the issue of the election.



Over 60% - BOOMS

1984 74% "Morning in America"
1986 63% Good Times
1988 70% "3rd term" for Reagan
1996 67% Clinton Re-elected
1998 78% Democrats Defy Impeachment
2000 79% Gore Wins

40% - 60% - OTHER ISSUE

1976 56% Watergate
1978 56% Tax Revolt
1994 49% Guns & Health Care
2002 56% 9/11
2004 55% War on Terror
2006 51% Iraq War

Under 40% - BUSTS

1974 30% Watergate Election
1980 32% Malaise Election
1982 35% "Stay the Course"?
1990 38% Anti-Incumbent Voting
1992 35% "The Economy, Stupid!"
2008 16% Obama Wins
2010 25% Republican Landslide
2011 24% (Uh Oh)

Trends from 1974-May 04: CNN/TIME Magazine polls. Trends from Oct. 04-Feb. 06: CNN/USA Today/Gallup polls. Trends from May 06 to Aug. 11: CNN/ORC polls. Illustration by Bill Rapp and Jessica Harris. © 2011 Third Way. Free for re-use with attribution.