

Opinion: Candidates not connecting with the middle class

By Scott Rasmussen

Nearly every national political campaign emphasizes the importance of connecting with the middle class. So how come in the 2012 presidential race, none of the candidates are able to make that connection?

A hint may be found in the results of a Rasmussen Reports survey showing that just 27 percent of voters nationwide believe government management of the economy actually helps the economy. Fifty percent think government economic activism does more harm than good.



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What is especially interesting about the data is the income demographic. Upper-income Americans are evenly divided as to whether government management of the economy helps or hurts. Middle-income Americans, on the other hand, overwhelmingly view government management of the economy as hurtful.

The affluent, perhaps because they can easily gain access to the policymakers, are OK with government management of the economy. They want it done well, and many want it done in a way to benefit their own interests. That's why a plurality of

Americans now believe the United States has a system of crony capitalism rather than free-market competition.

The middle class, without friends in Congress or on Wall Street, has an entirely different view. Broadly speaking, it sees the federal government as a burden weighing down both the economy and the middle class. To help the economy, most simply want to reduce the burden. Seventy-seven percent of voters think that the government could help the economy by reducing the deficit. Seventy-one percent think it would help to reduce government spending, and 59 percent think tax cuts would help.

So when a politician talks of helping the middle class with a new government program, it just doesn't ring true.

Most candidates miss this distinction because they tend to hang out with more affluent Americans. They tend to discuss how to make government work rather than how to make the nation work. To some, an issue like the price of gas is primarily a question of how it will impact potential investments in alternative fuels or whether higher gas prices are good because they encourage conservation.

To the middle class, the question of gas prices is much different. Data from the Discover Consumer Spending Monitor shows that half of all Americans don't have any money left over after paying their basic bills each month. For these Americans, rising gas prices force unpleasant lifestyle changes.

To connect with the middle class requires understanding the middle class. Franklin Roosevelt did this in the 1930s. As he expanded the role of the federal government, he explained it in a manner that made sense. His greatest achievement, Social Security, was not sold as a government handout but as an insurance program with people setting aside money during their working years that could be drawn down in retirement. That attitude still resonates with 21st century Americans.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan understood the rising frustration with an ever-expanding government. In his first inaugural address, he said, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Six out of 10 voters still agree.

America is still looking for the 21st century candidate who can connect with the middle class.

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