Obama Aims to Keep White Voters on Board

As Groups Who Backed President in 2008 Drift to GOP, Midwest Bus Trip Tailors Message to the Young and Working-Class

By LAURA MECKLER And CAROL E. LEE

PEOSTA, Iowa—President Barack Obama’s Midwest trip this week has allowed him to address a central challenge for his re-election: His popularity has slumped among white voters—particularly young, poor and working-class Americans—as Washington has struggled to help boost economic growth.

On the first two days of his bus tour in rural Minnesota and Iowa, Mr. Obama has pitched a basket of long-discussed ideas, promoted small changes the administration can make on its own and promised to put forth a “very specific plan” in September to boost the economy, create jobs and control the deficit.

The moves are targeted at voters who supported the president in 2008 but now are shying away from him. That problem seems particularly acute for the president among white working-class voters, whose support was shaky in the last election and whose allegiances are traditionally dictated by their pocketbooks.

White working-class voters rarely favor Democrats, and Mr. Obama lost this group by 18 percentage points in 2008. But the Republican advantage widened to 30 points in 2010. Mr. Obama will need to narrow that gap to win re-election.

Other segments of the white vote are also moving to the GOP, according to the surveys by the Pew Research Center, including young whites, those with less than a high-school education and
voters earning less than $30,000. The latter group favored Democrats by 15 points in 2008; they now back the GOP by four points.

Black and Hispanic voters are affected by the economy as well—in many cases, more harshly. But they represent more loyal Democratic constituencies and, for the most part, have stuck with the Democrats.

Ruy Teixeira of the liberal Center for American Progress Action Fund, who has studied working-class white voters, said they start out suspicious of government and wary of Democrats, and were likely annoyed by the months spent talking about the nation's debt and borrowing limit and not jobs. "It's more like, what have you done for me lately," he said.

Mr. Obama's political advisers say the president's challenge is to convince voters his economic policies are better for them than those of his GOP opponents. "The Republican candidates have now had three debates, and with tens of thousands of words exchanged in those debates they didn't mention the middle class a single time," said Obama campaign spokesman Ben LaBolt.

Peosta's Democratic Mayor Dick Avenarius, whose town hosted the president for a rural economic forum Tuesday, voted for Mr. Obama in 2008 but is undecided for 2012. "I just want to see who the other options are," he said. "The most important issue is jobs."

Mr. Obama's central message is shaping up to be as much about politics as policy. Republicans are blocking action, he said, urging voters to transfer their anger from him to the GOP.

"My attitude is, get it done," the president said at a town hall meeting Monday evening in Decorah, Iowa. "And if they don't get it done, then we'll be running against a Congress that's not doing anything for the American people, and the choice will be very stark."

Brendan Buck, a spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio), replied that the Democrats in the Senate blocked House-passed jobs bills. "Republicans will continue to offer common-sense solutions to reduce economic uncertainty, fight job-destroying regulations, and promote an environment for private sector job growth," he said.

Congress has shown willingness to move in two areas—free-trade deals and patent reform. But Republicans are skeptical of his plans for infrastructure financing and show little interest in extending a payroll-tax holiday or unemployment insurance. The White House is considering other ideas, including combining agencies that deal with trade and exports into a new cabinet department.
On Tuesday, Mr. Obama announced efforts to boost small-business lending in rural areas. And his administration said it would spend up to $510 million to subsidize the production of biofuels not made from corn.

Dan Neenan, who runs an agriculture-safety program at Northeast Iowa Community College, voted for Mr. Obama in 2008 but now blames both parties for inaction. He said he is weighing his options for 2012.

The economy in this part of the country is stronger than many other places, with unemployment at 6% in Iowa and 6.7% in Minnesota, compared with 9.1% nationally. Nonetheless, said Nikki Brevig, the executive director of the Decorah Area Chamber of Commerce, local businesses are anxious over what future federal policies will be adopted.

A registered independent, she voted for Mr. Obama in 2008 but is now unsure about 2012. "At this point I'm still waiting for all of the options," she said.

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