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Leadership Crisis

As the economy faces the risk of another recession, and the 2012 campaign looms, President Obama has been groping for a response to the biggest crisis of his career. All he has to do is listen to the voters.

The Times and CBS News released a new poll on Friday, and once again we were impressed that Americans are a lot smarter than Republican leaders think, more willing to sacrifice for the national good than Democratic leaders give them credit for, and more eager to see the president get tough than Mr. Obama and his conflict-averse team realize.

So long as the politicians keep reinforcing their misconceptions — and listening only to themselves — the country has little chance of getting what the voters want most: jobs and a growing economy.

Despite what the Republicans loudly proclaim, Americans do not buy into economic theories that were disproved 25 years ago. What the new poll and others show is that most do not see the deficit and “big government” as the main problem, and they do not buy the endless calls for slashing spending and reckless deregulation.

A solid majority said creating jobs should be the highest priority for the government now and that payroll taxes should be cut to help with that. A whopping 8 in 10 think building bridges, roads and schools is important, which means — gasp — spending money.

Many Democrats are so gun shy that they don't dare even to talk about raising taxes on the rich. But 71 percent of those polled said any plan to reduce the budget deficit should include both spending cuts and tax increases. And Americans understand that there are choices to be made; 56 percent said the wealthier

should pay higher taxes to reduce the federal deficit.

It bears repeating that this is all entirely rational, and what the Republicans and some Democrats are proposing is absurd. The country has tried reckless deregulation and overly deep tax and spending cuts before. It brought more than one recession in the last century; caused the near collapse of the financial system and another recession in this one; and helped pile up the current deficit.

Mr. Obama has been making many of those points for months. But he has been doing it with speeches that, while eloquent, are often too long and nuanced, and then lack the kind of relentless repetition that is needed to drown out catchy but false Republican talking points.

He has wasted far too much time trying to puzzle out how he can shave policies down far enough to get the Republicans to cooperate. The answer has long been clear: He can't. Since he was elected, the Republicans have openly said they would not work with him, and a year ago, Senator Mitch McConnell, the minority leader, said explicitly that the Republicans' goal was simply to deny Mr. Obama a second term. The new Times poll showed that Americans do not believe bipartisanship is achievable. Six in 10 Democrats want the president to challenge Republicans more. He should not worry about voters thinking he is being mean. What he should worry about is that he is not showing them that he is fighting all out for their interests.

Mr. Obama has done more for the country than many voters realize. The stimulus program so demonized by Republicans was too small, but it saved the economy from a complete collapse. Mr. Obama's maligned decision to bail out the car companies saved large numbers of jobs. The huge benefits of his health care reform, which Republicans have vowed to repeal, will become clearer to Americans in the years ahead.

That is not enough. The president has done far too little for far too long to help struggling homeowners, and he must do more to put Americans back to work. That is why it is so important and welcome that he has finally begun to take on Congress. His speech to the joint session outlining a significant jobs program was followed by the sound demand that it be paid for with tax revenue increases.

The question is whether he will now fight hard for that program. To get there, he

does not need the entire G.O.P. caucus, just a few members, but he also needs to show more strength in leading his own less than courageous caucus. And, win or lose, he needs to stay out of the bargaining backroom and keep making his case to the public.

There is so much noise out there that we are not sure most voters know how much they agree with the president. It is up Mr. Obama to show them.