



Is it the Gas Prices ... Stupid??

BY BRIDGETTE OUTTEN

It's a political football that has been passed back and forth throughout the years, but experts agree that no U.S. president – including President Barack Obama – has any control over gas prices.

Which would make recent [GOP claims](#) that Obama is to blame for the rising cost of gas inaccurate.

"Any president has very little influence," says [Pat Michaels](#), Senior Fellow in Environmental Studies at the nonpartisan think tank, the [Cato Institute](#) in Washington, D.C. "Really the only control that exists is the strategic petroleum reserves – that could drive the price up or down about 10 cents or so, but it's really not very important.

"Nonetheless, by doing something with the reserve, one can give the impression that things are being done, or can be done, which is probably good politically," Michaels adds in a recent interview with [Politic365](#).

How the public perception of Obama's handling of gas prices will sway the election this fall is anyone's guess, but the issue will be on the minds of voters, said [Lisa Margonelli](#) in a discussion with [Politic365](#). Margonelli is Energy Policy Initiative director and Senior Research Fellow at the California-based think tank [New America Foundation](#).

"Voters do look at gas prices," Margonelli says. "They're very, very sensitive to gas prices. Gas prices are not just the amount you pay to put gas in your tank. They're sort of a big psychological number. It's like a baseball score about the economy."

And most families go to the gas pump about twice a week, she explains, feeling that sting – and panic – of the ever-increasing costs. Those costs begin to add up, creating a domino effect burden that impacts their ability to buy basic items such as food and clothing. And it can also force families to hold back on buying other consumer products, eventually leading to another slowdown in economic activity.

However, if the economy is better and it appears more people are going back to work by November, people will be less concerned. "President Obama is probably going to do everything he can to both make it seem like prices are going down and make it seem like it's not that big of a deal," Margonelli says.

Margonelli and Michaels agree that Obama has little influence on gas prices. Margonelli noted that various factors actually go into the rising and falling of the cost of gas. While Obama could have an impact on some of those factors by creating policy that translates into, for example, Americans relying less on fossil fuels, that's still a long-range goal.

"Instead of trying to reduce the price, which is essentially impossible, [Obama] can try to reduce the amount of gasoline that people use," Margonelli explains.

But, what will that approach do for his political chances in November? Perception is everything in politics, so how will voters perceive where the buck stops? Though the GOP have suggested that Obama could authorize more drilling for oil, the president himself has said [it's just not that simple](#): "We can't just drill our way to lower gas prices — not when we consume 20 percent of the world's oil," Obama said in a recent radio address.

It's not a new rebuttal for Obama nor it is a new situation for any president – Democrats accused President George W. Bush of failing to control gas prices as well. However, Margonelli believes Obama may be one of the first presidents to acknowledge that he doesn't have that control.

"I think that President Obama is one of the first presidents to say that he actually can't influence gas prices," she says. "I think that it's easier to accuse of him of failing to influence gas prices by the people who oppose him."