

Battleground Analysis:
2016: An Election Season Unlike Any Other

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Fear and Loathing in the Political Environment

The 2016 Election Presidential Primary Season has seen events with no precedent, and the fall campaign season looks to be more of the same. Despite concerns that our volatile primary season has had a dispiriting impact on Republican voters, this data finds much good news in the political environment for the Republican Party. On voter intensity, there is only a one-point gap between Republicans (73%) and Democrats (74%) who say that they are extremely likely to vote. On likelihood to turn out, the good news is Republican intensity has held up, with the not so good news being the Democratic vote intensity gap has closed.

On the generic Congressional ballot, Democrats hold a five point advantage (46%-41%), but we strongly concur with the assertion by Michael Barone and others that given the substantial advantage the Democrats have in supermajority Congressional Districts, a five point deficit for Republicans is actually the expected deficit if the parties are at parity. In addition, Republicans actually hold a fourteen point advantage (49%-35%) in states where there is a contested gubernatorial election.

There is also an enormous appetite for change in the electorate. A solid majority (66%) of voters believe the country is on the wrong track, a trend we have seen in our Battleground Polls for well over a decade. What has grown in recent years is the intensity of feeling that the country is off on the wrong track, to today where a majority (55%) “strongly” believe the country is on the wrong path. Often assumed to be a partisan measurement of which Party controls the White House, even a plurality of conservative Democrats (47%) think the country is on the wrong track.

While President Obama has the highest approval rating (50%) that we have seen for him in years, most voters are not looking for a candidate who will be advocating to continue his policies. Given a choice, sixty percent (60%) of voters select that they want the next President to take the country in a different direction versus just over one-third (35%) of the electorate who wants to continue the Obama policies. In states where the 2016 Presidential Election will be competitive, fully fifty-six percent (56%) of voters want the next President to take the country in a different direction.

This political environment will present an enormous challenge for Secretary Clinton. The contested Democratic Presidential primary has forced her to strongly emphasize her

close ties to President Obama and to reinforce her commitment to continuing the governing philosophy and goals of the Obama administration. Exit polling has continually shown that she struggles to be seen as honest and trustworthy with voters. This scenario – needing to run a third Obama term campaign with her base while running a change and reform campaign with swing voters – will only serve to deepen voter concerns about her authenticity.

The primary season has also illustrated a key point from this data about the political environment – voters are deeply worried about the economy and are skeptical about the government’s ability to handle looming problems. More than seven-in-ten voters (71%) say that they are very (31%) or somewhat (41%) worried that the United States will suffer another economic downturn that will negatively impact their family. Three-in-four (75%) voters in competitive states for the 2016 election share this level of worry. In addition, Republicans (41% very worried) and Independents (42% very worried) are driving concerns among voters with the highest level of economic anxiety.

This economic anxiety is not just a short term concern. We continue to find that a strong majority (65%) of voters believe the next generation will not be better off than the current generation. This includes a majority (50%) of voters who strongly believe this. Indeed, this pessimism about the economic future crosses all types of demographic lines with majorities of groups as diverse as 18-34 year olds, seniors, very conservative voters, and liberals all holding the view that the next generation will not be better off.

Despite this anxiety and pessimism, there is limited interest among voters for the government to take an interventionist role in job creation. Voters split evenly (46%-46%) on whether the priority of the federal government should be to ensure that every person is employed with a good standard of living versus the priority of the government should be to get out of the way and let the free market help people succeed. However, this split is not even among partisans. Interest in the federal government intervening to ensure jobs and standards of living is driven by strong support among Democrats (68%), especially liberal Democrats (73%). Among the remaining spectrum of the electorate, a strong majority of Republicans (71%) and a plurality of Independents (46%) favor the federal government staying out of the way.

Like the political environment, these economic views of the electorate present a substantial problem for her campaign. There is no conceivable way in which she can appeal to the base Democratic coalition by advocating to continue the economic policies of the Obama administration while also providing comfort to the remaining swath of the electorate who believe these policies are capable of imposing real harm on their pocketbook and on the pocketbooks of the next generation. She will be proposing

economic solutions that will be met with skepticism and in many cases, outright concern.

Voter attitudes about U.S. policies abroad also illustrate a deep level of voter concern about both the present and the future. On trade, a strong majority (73%) of voters think that trade agreements have either been bad (50%) for the national economy or have not had much impact (23%) on the national economy. The partisan divide on this issue should be of particular concern for Democratic candidates. While a majority of Republicans (68%) and a plurality of Independents (49%) think these deals have been bad for the U.S. economy, Democrats divide almost evenly with about one-third of Democrats thinking these trade deals have been good for the economy (32%) and about one-third of Democrats thinking these trade deals have been bad for the economy (33%). So, no matter where a Democratic candidate is on trade deals, about one-third of their base voters will think that candidate holds a position counter to their own.

On terrorism, a plurality (46%) of voters indicates that they are very (13%) or somewhat (33%) worried that they or their immediate family will be the target of a terrorist attack. This is a concern for which few candidates running for office can offer any solace. However, it will be very difficult for Secretary Clinton to comfort the anxiety of voters on this issue when she was one of the chief architects of the Obama foreign policies that have led voters to have this level of concern about terrorist attacks.

The bottom line is many of these measurements are what you would expect in a normal presidential year, where the President is not running for reelection, and economic and other concerns including the direction of the country are weighing on voters' minds, but then again, this is not a normal presidential year.

Presidential Race: Will the Democrats trump the GOP advantages?

So, given this favorable political environment and the immovable challenges facing the presumptive Democratic Presidential nominee, one would expect the current Republican delegate leader to be in a strong position to win in November. One would be wrong.

In many ways, the Republican Party has never seen a candidate quite like Donald Trump. He has been able to do a lot of things this primary season that few thought possible and now he appears poised to do one more seemingly impossible thing – lose a Presidential race to a Democratic nominee as unpopular and hampered as Secretary Clinton.

Among the figures tested, Trump has the highest unfavorable rating (65%), which includes a majority (52%) of the electorate who hold a “strongly” unfavorable view of him. While both Hillary Clinton (56% unfavorable) and Ted Cruz (55% unfavorable) have majority unfavorable ratings, neither have unfavorable ratings as intensely negative as Trump – Clinton 46% “strongly” unfavorable and Cruz 37% “strongly” unfavorable.

In contrast, both Bernie Sanders (49%) and John Kasich (45%) have favorable ratings with a plurality of voters. In fact, Kasich has the lowest unfavorable score (29%) of any of the candidates tested and he has another twenty-six percent (26%) of the electorate who have no opinion, so even at this stage, he could still make a substantial improvement to his favorable rating.

Our two Presidential ballot tests starkly demonstrate the challenges that Donald Trump will face. Despite the advantages of the political environment and issues, Trump trails Hillary Clinton by three points (46%-43%). On a ballot test against Bernie Sanders, Trump trails by eleven points (51%-40%).

The closeness of the ballot with Clinton and the amount of undecided vote would suggest that Trump has an opportunity to close this gap and defeat Clinton, especially considering she has a great deal of political baggage of her own. However, in a series of follow-up questions after these ballot tests, just forty percent (40%) of voters said that they would consider voting for Trump. In contrast, a majority (59%) of voters say they would not consider voting for Trump, including a majority of voters (51%) who strongly would not consider voting for Trump.

This unwillingness of the majority of the electorate to even consider voting for Trump paired with the data that he is currently maximizing his vote from those who would consider voting for him indicates that Trump has little to no means of building a winning coalition in this Presidential race. Complicated by Donald Trump’s near universal awareness among the electorate and highly negative image, he also has no means to improve his image to improve his ability to get voters to consider voting for him.

Nothing illustrates this more than a simple segmentation of the ballot with Donald Trump’s image ratings. In this latest Battleground Poll with Republican voters we have Trump at a 56% favorable/41% unfavorable so he is right side up, but intensity with Republican voters is now 29% “strongly” favorable and 27% “strongly” unfavorable. Bottom line is he has dug himself a very deep hole, maintaining a high level of intensity

from his supporters over the last six months, but has also added intensity to the negative picture that an equal amount of Republicans had about his character and style, and it certainly won't disappear quickly by changing his style of campaigning. As important, unlike Clinton, Trump also looks to have a nomination fight that will, at a minimum continue through June 7th that is unlikely to allow him to be anything but what the Trump voters have seen from the beginning.

Again, the example of how deep this is can be seen in the general election ballot. He is at forty-three percent (43%) on the ballot with numbers that raise the question of whether or not Trump is facing the same thing he did in the primaries – a very high floor and a very low ceiling – and the question of growing beyond that ceiling. With the forty-three percent (43%) of the voters that say they will vote for him, Trump is at 69% favorable and 28% unfavorable – 38% “strongly” favorable and 12% “strongly” unfavorable. (Many of those voting for Trump even though they hold negative feelings about him are Republican voters that will vote for him over Clinton, having equally negative and even deeper negative feelings Hillary Clinton.) The concern over Trump having a low ceiling comes from looking at his image with those either voting for Hillary Clinton or undecided on the ballot. With the forty-six percent (46%) of voters who are voting for Clinton, Trump's favorable rating is at five percent (5%), and his unfavorable rating is at ninety-five percent (94%) – with 2% “strongly” favorable and 84% “strongly” unfavorable – certainly not much opportunity for growth there! The really concerning results are with the 11% who are undecided. Trump's image rating with voters undecided on the presidential ballot are at six percent (6%) favorable and eighty-eight percent (88%) unfavorable – with none of these voters saying they are “strongly” favorable and 74% saying they are “strongly” unfavorable. Yes, the Trump campaign needs to improve Trump's image with a broader swath of the electorate. The question is how deeply baked it is into his persona at this point. We see no variation of this in the data based on different levels of turnout, and with his current image ratings, find it hard to see where Trump can push his ceiling beyond forty-five percent (45%). If Trump's image ratings continue to be as stubborn to move in a positive direction as they have been to date, Trump may be left with the only option of driving Clinton's negative numbers up to match his own, an option that may be needed regardless, when looking at other weaknesses in the survey's data points.

A split series on issue handling also demonstrates how Trump is underperforming the national Republican image. As seen in the chart below, Trump underperforms the GOP as a whole on every issue tested. In addition, on the issue of foreign affairs, the GOP overall has a four point advantage while he is at a twenty-seven point disadvantage to Clinton on this issue.

Issue	GOP	Dem		Trump	Clinton		Trump underperformance
The economy	53%	42%		46%	47%		7%
Taxes	51%	42%		47%	46%		4%
Jobs	51%	43%		47%	46%		4%
Foreign Affairs	48%	44%		33%	60%		15%
Health care	43%	51%		40%	53%		3%
Caring about people like you	43%	47%		35%	53%		8%
Fighting for the middle class	37%	55%		34%	56%		3%

This underwhelming performance on both the ballot and on key issues is a key driver of why so many Republicans are still looking for an alternative to Trump as a Presidential nominee. A candidate who has a majority unfavorable ratings, a losing position on ballot tests, a disadvantage to the presumptive Democrat nominee on key issues, and little to no means to improve any of these defects is not a candidate one would expect a major party to be coalescing around.

The 2016 electorate is already highly engaged and engaged in ways that were unthinkable even ten years ago. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of voters say they have been following the Presidential Election either very (47%) or somewhat (42%) closely. A majority (52%) of voters say they have seen, read, or heard about the Presidential campaign on a social media website. It is much easier than ever for voters to find information about candidates and campaigns in ways that are comfortable to them.

However, this ease of access has also led to an increasing level of concern among voters about the tone of the Presidential campaign. Regarding the coarse language seen during this Presidential campaign, a majority (50%) of voters select the sentiment that “This language is repulsive and has no place in a Presidential campaign.” In contrast, less than one-quarter (24%) of voters select that this language is . . . “not a big deal.”

These concerns appear to be having a real impact on voter behaviors. Fully forty-two percent (42%) of voters say that this coarse language has either made them less likely to cast a vote for President (6%), or less likely to vote for a specific candidate (36%). This reticence to vote is notably higher among voters who are consistently undecided on the Presidential ballots. So, both nominees, no matter who they are, will be facing the dual and conflicting challenges of motivating their base voters after a bruising primary campaign, and trying to attract these persuadable voters who are most likely to be pushed into non-participation by the red meat rhetoric that will be needed to rally base voters.

The Republican Party has a strongly favorable political environment for winning the White House. If a mainstream Republican candidate were the presumptive nominee, the GOP would likely be in a strong position for a lot of wins, top to bottom, in November. However, the party is facing the challenge of the possibility of an unconventional nominee who is likely to squander most of this favorable environment due to his temperament and rhetoric. There is still a lot of time and contests between now and when the Republican Presidential nominee will be selected. Should that nominee be Donald Trump, the GOP looks to be headed towards a tough, if not losing race at the top of the ticket, which is certainly likely to have a ripple effect of losses down the ballot and across the country. Should that nominee be someone else, the GOP would likely fare much better from the top of the ticket on down, being able to take advantage of not only the political environment, but the historically high negatives of Hillary Clinton. Yes, the path Donald Trump chooses to take over these final months of the nomination process will be extremely important to the tone and tenor of the campaign leading into the general election. (So will the decisions that the Republican Party makes over the next three months, which will be some of the most important, the party and its members will ever make.) For the Republicans, the nomination process may very well end up at a contested convention. Some say that would be the end of the Republican Party. Those that do, forget the rich history of the Republican Party and contested conventions. After all, the party's first President, Abraham Lincoln, came out of a contested convention, at a time when the country was no less divided.