

Battleground 59: A (Potentially) Wasted Opportunity for the Republican Party

Republican Analysis

by: Ed Goetas and Brian Nienaber

In what seems like so long ago, the 2016 Presidential Election cycle began full of optimism for the Republican Party. Historically, the party out of power, after two Presidential terms of the opposing party, tends to be in the best position to win. In the practical sense, the Democratic Party was headed towards an uncontested nomination with one of the most polarizing and unpopular nominees ever. In contrast, the Republicans had a field of seventeen candidates, including some of the most popular and accomplished elected officials from their respective states. This seemed to be a shoo-in that would only be threatened by a catastrophic blunder like having a perceived intemperate, inexperienced, rhetorical bomb thrower win the nomination. Of course, the GOP did do such a thing, and now we face a Presidential Election unlike any in modern day polling, in which it is very likely that come November there will not be a single voter in the country who has a favorable image of both Trump and Clinton. This will be an election in which the vast number of the electorate will not be voting for the candidate who they have a favorable view, but will be choosing between two candidates who they both view unfavorably.

This analysis does not suggest that there is no way that Donald Trump can win. In fact, were he a more traditional Republican candidate who was running a more traditional Presidential campaign, this data suggests that he could win by a notable margin. Despite all the tumult of his campaign, Trump trails Clinton by just two points (42%-40%) on the four way Presidential ballot, with Gary Johnson receiving ten percent (10%) support. The closeness is driven by both the political environment, and by the image of Hillary Clinton.

As we have been seeing in the data for several years, a strong majority (66%) of voters think the country is going in the wrong direction, including an intense fifty-five percent (55%) of voters who “strongly” believe the country is off on the wrong track. Indeed, outside of partisan Democrats, a majority of every other major demographic group thinks the country is on the wrong track. In addition, the most important issue matrix illustrates the appeal of a businessman who promises to bring substantial change to the status quo. The three top issues selected by voters are the economy (21%), dysfunction in government (18%), and jobs (11%). This strong focus on economic issues is also

illustrated with seventy-three percent (73%) of voters saying that they are very or somewhat worried about an economic downturn in the near future (29% very worried). In contrast, while still a concern, over the last few months there has been a drop-off in the level of concern over terrorism, forty-three percent (43%) of voters have this same level of concern about being the target of a terrorist attack – with just nine percent (9%) saying they are very worried. Barring a major terrorist attack in the United States (or perhaps Western Europe), this fall, expect the economy to play an even more dominant roll in the presidential election.

Hillary Clinton is one of the most unpopular political figures to serve as a major party nominee for President. At this stage of the race, when almost no paid media criticizing her has been run, she has an unfavorable image with a strong majority (55%) of voters, including holding a “strongly” unfavorable image with fully forty-eight percent (48%) of the electorate.

One of the major factors keeping the race tilting towards Clinton is the strongly unfavorable image of Donald Trump. He is viewed unfavorably by a sizable majority (58%) of the electorate and has a “strongly” unfavorable image with a majority (50%) of voters. What is particularly notable is that in addition to the strongly negative views of expected opponents, Trump also has a majority unfavorable rating with voters to whom his campaign has been targeting like men (55%), White voters (51%), middle class voters (59%), and voters whose top issue concern is dysfunction in government (66%). [On that last note, while middle class angst is at the very core of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country and dysfunction of government to solve problems, setting the stage for a “change” election, “likeability”, at least at this point of the campaign, is also still very much a factor.]

Indeed, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are fortunate to be running against each other, and not a better liked and less polarizing opponent. Only two percent (2%) of voters nationwide have a favorable impression of both of them – while a historic eighteen percent (18%) of voters hold an unfavorable impression of both of them – and the intensity of that dislike is strong.

Another battery of questions on this survey illustrates well how narrow the persuadable electorate is for both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Voters were asked if they were willing to consider voting for all four of the candidates. While it was not surprising that a majority of voters said they would not be willing to vote for either the Libertarian or Green party candidates, it appears there will be no mandate this November for either of the two major party nominees as every candidate has a majority of the

electorate indicating they are not willing to consider voting for them (52% of the electorate state that they would not consider voting for Hillary Clinton and 53% state they would not consider voting for Donald Trump). Additionally, Clinton has forty-two percent (42%) support on the ballot test and only forty-seven percent of voters say they are willing to consider voting for her. For Trump, he is at forty percent (40%) support on the ballot and forty-six percent of voters indicate that they willing to consider voting for him. So, barring some major shift in how these two candidates are perceived, each candidate will spend tens of millions of dollars and thousands of hours pursuing a very narrow five or six percent of the electorate that is willing to consider them but not yet supporting them.

Hillary Clinton does have the advantage on a number of key measures from the four-way Presidential ballot. Most importantly, Clinton has a five-point advantage (34%-29%) over Trump among voters who have made a definite choice. Amongst Johnson and Stein voters, she has an eight-point advantage (34%-26%) over Trump on being the second choice to these voters. In addition, her voters are more likely to describe their vote as a “for Clinton” vote (60%) than Trump voters are to describe their vote as a “for Trump” vote (54%).

Despite this notably higher level of enthusiasm among Clinton voters on these measurements, there is a remarkable level of discontent among voters about this Presidential Election, especially Independent voters who hold over sixty percent (60%) unfavorable ratings on both these major party candidates. Overall, a significant number of voters say they are very likely to not vote at all (7% very likely/6% somewhat likely), skip voting for President (10% very likely/8% somewhat likely), vote for a third party candidate for President (10% very likely/14% somewhat likely), or vote for a candidate for President different than the candidate that they normally support (11% very likely/15% somewhat likely). In addition, even though a prominent pundit suggested recently that ticket splitting no longer occurs, twenty percent (20%) of voters say they are very likely to split their ticket and thirteen percent (13%) of voters are already splitting their ticket when you compare their preference on the Congressional ballot with their Presidential ballot preference.

In fact, though Clinton does have the advantage on the Presidential ballot and another thirteen percent (13%) of voters are voting for the independent candidates, Republicans are holding their own on the generic Congressional ballot. This ballot is within the margin of error with the Democrats holding advantage of just three points (45%-42%). While Trump is struggling to secure base GOP voters, fully eighty-one percent (81%) of vote behavior Republicans select the GOP on this ballot, which puts them

at parity with Democrats selecting the Democratic Party on this ballot (81%).

Issue Handling

The issue handling series also demonstrates that Congressional and Senate Republicans will be able to run campaigns that are not as tied to the fortunes and foibles of the Trump campaign as is traditionally the case in Presidential election years. As seen below, the Republican Party consistently runs ahead of Trump and has advantages over the Democrats on issues like the economy, jobs, foreign affairs, and taxes.

Issue	GOP	Dem	GOP Adv.	Trump	Clinton	Trump Adv.	Trump/GOP Differential
The economy	53%	42%	11%	46%	51%	-5%	16%
Jobs	50%	43%	7%	47%	49%	-2%	9%
Foreign Affairs	49%	44%	5%	40%	55%	-15%	20%
Taxes	49%	45%	4%	47%	49%	-2%	6%
Caring about people like you	43%	47%	-4%	38%	48%	-10%	6%
Fighting for the middle class	43%	50%	-7%	40%	55%	-15%	8%
Health Care	43%	51%	-8%	42%	54%	-12%	4%

Personal Quality Comparisons

The personal qualities comparison series for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton yielded some expected and some unexpected results. As one would expect, Trump has a significant advantage on saying what he believes and a less than expected advantage on being honest and on being a strong leader. For Clinton, she has a stronger than expected advantage on temperament and is also running strong on the measurements of “cares about people like you” and “represents your values” – both traditionally important factors for voters in past Presidential elections. On one measurement – “is healthy enough to be effective” – it is surprising to find that the issue of health is essentially a draw considering the strong coverage that concerns about Clinton's health has received in some conservative media outlets

Quality	Trump	Clinton	Trump Advantage
Says What They Believe	59%	30%	29%
Is Honest and Trustworthy	39%	35%	4%
Strong Leader	46%	45%	1%
Is Healthy Enough to be Effective	41%	43%	-2%
Represents your Values	39%	47%	-8%
Has the Temperament Needed to Serve	31%	57%	-26%

In sum, we enter this final stretch of this unusual campaign season with some hope and some concerns for both parties. Both parties have remarkably unpopular Presidential candidates with image ratings and flaws that would sink them if they were they not running against each other. What is clear, not only in this most recent George Washington University Battleground Poll, but in the bulk of all the publically released national polls, is that for all of their struggles, both Trump and Clinton have a path to victory. We do not expect major movement in the Ballot measurement of the Presidential race, even as both the Trump and Clinton campaigns increase their paid media, and look to the presidential debates, particularly the first debate, to be the next and perhaps last opportunity to change the presidential landscape in any significant way. Barring that occurring, look for the last, most significant impact on the final results being the ground game of the two campaigns. Intensity of the two candidates vote is fairly even going into the post-Labor Day battle of the 2016 Presidential Election. If that remains the case, the superior campaign in identifying and turning out their vote, may well make up the winning margin.

As far as the Republican candidates who are on the 2016 election ballot, it is evident that they can campaign as independent entities from Trump, not as much disconnecting from Donald Trump, as

focusing on the Republican values and issue positions that are the core of both their individual candidacies and Republican goals and principles as a whole. They have the advantage over Democrats on the issues that are the top concerns of many voters like the economy and jobs. No matter what happens at the top of the ticket, as long as the presidential race remains close, there is a path to victory for most, if not all of these hotly contested races for down ballot Republican candidates.