

Battleground 60:
Republicans and Donald Trump: Breaking up is hard to do!

Republican Analysis

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Don't take your love away from me
Don't you leave my heart in misery
If you go then I'll be blue
Cause breaking up is hard to do

Neil Sedaka

“Breaking up is hard to do”

1962

This 1962 song by Neil Sedaka has resonated from time to time over the last year. Especially as we have seen variations of the break up as the campaign has moved through the primary season into the general election – from the “Stop Trump” movement that started early in the primary season, to the “Never Trump” group that came out of the primaries, to the last week where nearly a quarter of those sharing a ballot with Donald Trump disavowed their support for the top of the ticket. Ironically, this song had a big comeback in 1976, at the very time when there was another potentially big split in the Republican electorate. At that point in the 1976 campaign, however, the two principals (Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford) put party unity and, more importantly, the best interest of the country, ahead of personal interest. But as much as those who look back to 1976 in a nostalgic way, that was then and this is now, this year’s Republican nominee has shown none of the qualities that were present when the break up was pieced back together in 1976. While the result of piecing things back together was not successful in the short term, one could argue that it subsequently lead to the rebuilding of the Republican party that put it on equal footing with the Democrats for the next twenty five years . . . and a time to promote –the party’s values, principles, and solutions to America’s problems.

But again, that was then and this is now. They say a week can be an eternity in politics, and the last week certainly stands as a good example. This latest George Washington University Battleground Poll began fielding on Saturday October 15, following the worst news cycle imaginable for a Presidential candidate. News reports about his boorish comments and the subsequently poor attempts to explain

and apologize for this behavior dominated the national news for days. The impact of this incident specifically and a poor campaign overall have taken a notable toll on Donald Trump and his campaign for President. (A toll he is likely to bounce back from, but more on that later.)

Donald Trump's image stands at sixty-one percent (61%) unfavorable, including a majority (53%) of the electorate who hold a "strongly" unfavorable view of him. Just over one-third (36%) of voters have a favorable impression of him. This is an astoundingly poor image rating for a major party candidate for President. The only thing that keeps this race even remotely in check, is the fact that Hillary Clinton's rating are also at historically high levels – with a fifty-three percent (53%) unfavorable rating and forty-six percent (46%) "strongly" unfavorable view of Hillary Clinton.

In addition, Trump has lost substantial ground on the ballot since our Battleground survey in September when he trailed Hillary Clinton by just two points. He now trails Clinton by eight points (39%-47%) and trails her by eight points (31%-39%) among voters who have made a definite choice on the ballot. Indeed, his total support (39%) is equal to her definite support. On the previous Battleground, the data indicated that Trump could turn this into a toss-up race if he could reign in his behavior and engage in some basic campaign tactics. He has failed at both of these tasks. Trump's only saving grace, is that he is running against Hillary Clinton, who is also a deeply flawed candidate – a political fact that was certainly tested over the last week.

This decline in standing with voters for Trump is also seen in the issue handling and quality handling comparisons with Hillary Clinton. He trails her on every issue tested, including issues like jobs, foreign affairs, and taxes that have been major components of his campaign. He also trails her on every personal quality tested with the exceptions of "says what he believes", a quality to which we believe many voters are not assigning a positive value, and "healthy enough to be effective", where he holds an advantage of just four points despite devoting paid media to assailing Clinton on this issue.

Like many situations in electoral politics, the Republican Party has been here before. In fact, the party has been in almost this exact situation – an overmatched candidate struggling to gain traction against a Clinton running a surprisingly successful campaign for President. In 1996, Senator Robert Dole saw his impending loss looming. He then graciously and heroically participated in helping endangered Republican candidates all over the country running as a check and balance to the excesses of a Clinton

administration. To date, Donald Trump has been unwilling and he is unlikely to engage in such a selfless show of political kindness.

However, Donald Trump has inadvertently provided Republican candidates with a similar level of political cover, although that does not seem to be his intention. His continued complaints and attacks about other Republicans has led to a clear division in this data between Donald Trump and the Republican Party. While Trump has seen his deficit on the ballot grow by six points to an eight-point deficit, the GOP deficit on the generic Congressional ballot has grown a third as much (two points) to put the GOP at a deficit of just five points. Those overall numbers, however, only tell half the story. Because we were in the field with this latest Battleground Poll less than twenty-four hours after the Access Hollywood tape, we were able to see what the immediate impact was. Coming out of the weekend, Trump was down on the 4-way ballot to Hillary Clinton by ten-points. More disconcerting, however, was the Congressional generic ballot dropped to a twelve-point deficit – the largest deficit for Republicans we had seen in the twenty-five years of conducting the Battleground Poll. By the last night of polling, while Trump had only recovered two-points on his matchup with Clinton, trailing Clinton by eight-points, the generic ballot dropped from down twelve, to down five-points 47% to 42%. Clearly, this separation between Trump and the Republican generic ballot was not driven by those Republicans taking a step away from Donald Trump, but by his rants against the Republican establishment. Again, clearly not the intent of Trump's rants, but certainly a gift to the Republicans on the ballot with him all the same.

This separation between the negative image of Donald Trump and the image of the Republicans nationwide best illustrated when looking at issue handling between the presidential candidates, and the Republican and Democratic Parties. While Trump trails Clinton on every issue tested on the issue handling series, the Republican Party has the advantage over the Democrats on a variety of issues, including the economy (+18%), taxes (+11%), jobs (+6%), and foreign affairs (+8%). Republican candidates across the country will be able to run with the advantage in the minds of voters on these key kitchen table issues and one of the signature issues of the Clinton campaign, foreign affairs. With or without the active assistance of Trump, Republican candidates will be able to run as their own independent entities whose electoral fortunes will not be tied to the sinking Presidential candidate of their party.

In fact looking more broadly at the political landscape, this remains an unusual election cycle in which voters are in some ways frustrated with the status quo and in some ways at peace with the status quo. No single issue is capturing the interest of the electorate. In addition, running mates have better image ratings than the top of their ticket and a political spouse is a polarizing figure.

As has been the case for the longest period of time in the history of the Battleground Poll, a strong majority (63%) of voters think the country is on the wrong track. This includes a majority (54%) of voters who strongly believe this. Despite this negative attitude, President Obama has a majority job approval rating. Voters are dissatisfied with the direction of the country though many seem to no longer blame the President for this situation.

On the most important issue matrix, the economy (23%), dysfunction in government (14%), foreign threats (13%), health care (10%), and jobs (10%), are all selected by at least ten percent of the electorate. This diversity of voter interest offers a real challenge to the Presidential campaigns. There is not a single issue or issue area that is the concern of most voters. Voter interests range from basic pocketbook issues like the economy and jobs to existential concerns like threats from abroad and the functioning of government.

As one would expect for this Presidential campaign that has been like no other, neither Vice Presidential nominee has the image rating one would expect from a partisan attack dog. In fact both Tim Kaine (37% favorable/33% unfavorable) and Mike Pence (44% favorable/31% unfavorable) are “right side up” with favorable ratings that exceed their unfavorable ratings.

However, Bill Clinton has not settled into the traditional image rating of a political spouse who gets the benefit of the doubt from voters. While his image rating (48% favorable/47% unfavorable) is better than Hillary Clinton’s image, this polarized image is much more what one would expect from a running mate and not from a spouse.

As noted earlier, the tumultuous weeks of campaigning between the Battleground that finished fielding on September 1st and this study have seen substantial changes on the four way Presidential ballot. This ballot now has Clinton with an eight point lead (47%-39%) over Trump with Johnson at eight percent support (8%) and Stein at two percent support (2%). This represents a six point gain for Clinton since

the September Battleground.

A follow-up question on vote intensity also illustrates the two different trajectories of these campaigns. Fully sixty-five percent (65%) of Clinton voters indicate their vote is an affirmative vote for Clinton versus just twenty-nine percent (29%) of Clinton voters who indicate their vote is a defensive vote against Trump. In contrast, Trump voters are much more evenly split (50% for Trump/43% against Clinton). If Clinton can use the next few weeks to become less odious to current Trump supporters, she could convert many of these defensive voters to her side, but we see that as highly unlikely. The more likely scenario, barring more damaging tapes from Trump or more damaging leaks from Wikileaks, is both candidates being so flawed that the ballot numbers settle somewhere in the range of a five to six percent deficit for Trump.

Indeed, many voters seem to already be making a calculation or one like it. On a question about who they think will win the election, more than six-in-ten voters (62%) think Clinton is going to win – only 27% now feel Donald Trump will win. Even with improvements on the overall presidential ballot for Trump, those feelings will only get deeper as the reality of the Electoral College math sinks in. As states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin move out of reach and red states like Arizona, Georgia, Missouri, and now Indiana remain in play, the Electoral map not only looks daunting, but nearly impossible. Not only must he win in Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, and Missouri. Trump must win in North Carolina . . . and must win in Florida . . . and must win in Ohio . . . and Iowa . . . and Nevada . . . and New Hampshire to get to 270 Electoral votes. He would have to run the table.

So, we enter these final few weeks of the campaign in an unusual, but not unexpected place. Donald Trump has failed in his attempt to run a different type of general election campaign that dramatically reshapes the electoral map for Republican Presidential campaigns. His campaign tactics have created a picture of almost certain defeat in November. The silver lining of this personality driven campaign is that it is his name and brand that are suffering and not Republicans overall. As the Republican Presidential candidate could be headed to a potentially historic drubbing at the polls, the parallel campaigns of Republicans all over the country will not be suffering the repercussions. In fact, this data indicates that Republicans are on track to hold their majorities in the House, remain competitive in enough Senate races to keep control of that legislative body, and win down ballot races all over the country. When the Republican Party looks to regroup and rebuild after this election, it will have plenty

of other electoral winners in the room. Yes, breaking up is hard to do, but at this point, it follows that Republicans may consider focusing on their relationship with the voters much more than their relationship with their Presidential nominee. There certainly may be no need to throw Trump under the bus, but there is also no need to jump into the hole (or foxhole) that Trump has dug with the American Electorate.

For all the strained parallels that people have tried to draw between Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan, there is one that hopefully stands out as the dust settles after this election, and that is the comparison of them having the same campaign slogan – which they do not. Donald Trump’s is “Make America Great Again” which is a very Trump, in your face demand of make America great again. Ronald Reagan’s was “Let’s make America Great Again” – a much more inspirational, all-inclusive slogan that embodied the personality, and patriotism of Ronald Reagan and tied it to the Republican Party. Hopefully, we as Republicans, as Americans, can get back to that after this election.