Battleground Poll 64
The 2020 Election: Meet the New Election, Same as 2016 Election
Republican Analysis
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Preamble

This sixty-fourth edition of the Battleground survey marks an exciting new chapter of this poll. We have been collaborating with Celinda Lake and her firm on the Battleground Poll since June 1991. This partnership has spanned 14 election cycles and seen us conduct over 75,000 voter interviews. The poll releases have always included not just the data, but separate, partisan, strategic analysis by Celinda Lake and her team on the Democratic side as well as Ed Goeas and his team for the Republican side.

This edition sees the Battleground return to the practice of releasing the poll at National Press Club roundtable discussion where reporters are given the opportunity to both hear analysis from both pollsters, but also interact and get their questions answered about the data.

This edition also marks the beginning of a new relationship with the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service who will be hosting an on campus event to both celebrate this collaboration and review questions on civility in the political world that are being held for release at this event.

Introduction

Nearly every election cycle begins with a great number of "unknowns" and "what if's," and the 2020 election cycle is no different. In this first Battleground Poll of the 2020 Presidential cycle, we want to start with the one constant seen in all the national polling data since August of 2015 – Donald Trump's image rating. In this latest data, Donald Trump's favorable rating is at forty-one percent (41%) and his unfavorable rating is fifty-five percent (55%). This comes as no surprise, particularly when looking at the President's disapproval rating. The day Donald Trump came down the escalator at Trump Tower to kick off his presidential campaign his unfavorable rating was 55%. Both the day Donald Trump was elected Present of the United States and the day Donald Trump was sworn in as President of the United States his unfavorable rating was fifty-five percent (55%). Moreover, for the last twenty-six months of the Trump Presidency, the average of Donald Trump's unfavorable rating in all the public polls has hovered in that 54% to 56% range. President Trump's image rating has been a flat line for almost four years. It is "baked" in.

That was certainly what was so unpredictable about the 2016 Presidential Election. Never before in modern day politics, have we seen a presidential nominee of either political party with an unfavorable rating over 50%. (Closest was Barry Goldwater in 1964 with a 47% unfavorable rating, but we all know how that election turned out!) What was unique about the 2016 election was that both presidential candidates – Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had over a fifty percent unfavorable rating on Election Day.

This initial look at the 2020 election shows that the election may be shaping up to be very much like the 2016 election, largely driven by the assumption that Donald Trump's image rating will continue to be a flat line and the voters will again go into the voter booth with a majority holding unfavorable views of President Trump. The two key questions are: (1) will those voters also hold a negative view of the Democratic nominee when they walk into the voting booth to vote, as was the case with Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Election Day, and (2) will a majority of those voters holding negative views of both Presidential nominees again decide that President Trump is their best option.

What we see in this latest Battleground data is that voters on both sides of the political spectrum are highly engaged, making a high turnout rate likely for both presidential nominees. In addition, there are sharp divides between partisans on not only issues, but on basic views about the country. Both parties will have key figures within the political institutions with upside down images leading them. In most places with down ballot elections, the elections of 2020 will not be won by marshalling the goodwill of voters about the political affiliations of candidates, but rather by making an issue-based case to voters that their policies will have a positive impact on their lives.

The Political Environment – Same Song . . . Different Year!

Voter enthusiasm is already at levels usually not seen until the days before a contested election. Fully eighty-two percent (82%) of voters indicate that they are extremely likely to vote. There is no partisan enthusiasm gap between Republicans (85% extremely likely to vote) and Democrats (83% extremely likely to vote). Partisans on both sides are engaged and ready to turn out for their side.

However, at this point, this enthusiasm seems driven more by the types of motivators seen in mid-term elections – negative emotions like anger and frustration – than by the types of motivators seen in

Presidential elections of positive sentiment at the top-of-the-ticket. A strong majority (57%) of voters believe that the country is on the wrong track, though there is a sharp partisan divide on this view. While ninety-two percent (92%) of Democrats think the country is on the wrong track, almost three-in-four Republicans (74%) think the country is headed in the right direction.

In looking at name identification scores for political leaders of both parties in the political institutions, it is clear that no political leader will have enough voter goodwill to provide broad assistance to the candidates of their party. President Trump (41% favorable/55% unfavorable), Nancy Pelosi (37% favorable/53% unfavorable), and Mitch McConnell (23% favorable/46% unfavorable) are all upside down with the overall electorate. In fact, even both political parties – Republicans (42% favorable/48% unfavorable) and Democrats (43% favorable/46% unfavorable) are upside down.

Candidates up and down the ballot, from President all the way to local offices, will not be able to win by just tying themselves to national leaders or even their national party. Instead, candidates should fully expect that their opponent will spend time and resources trying to align them with the unpopular national leaders of their party, setting the stage for yet another extremely negative campaign in the 2020 elections.

In the race for control of Congress, Democrats hold a five-point advantage (42%-37%). However, we are strong believers that this measure has a natural five-point advantage for Democrats due to their higher proportion nationally of supermajority districts. Like the direction of the country, this is a measure where partisans have already retreated to their corners. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of Republicans are already selecting the GOP on this measure, while ninety percent (90%) of Democrats are doing the same. Both parties will need to spend considerable time and resources pursuing the Independent voters who will be decisive in so many of these races and currently stand fairly split, 15% Republican and 17% Democratic, with fully 65% saying they are unsure how they will vote, even though they are showing themselves historically high in their intention to vote (72% extremely likely).

In addition, Congressional incumbents, even newly elected Members, will face the additional challenge of running against their institution. Two-in-three (67%) voters have an unfavorable view of Congress though a majority of voters (54%) approve of the job performance of their Member of Congress. Expect to see a lot of incumbent candidates running campaigns focused on local issues and their accomplishments to avoid the pitfall of running as part of a widely disliked organization run by widely disliked leaders.

President Trump – The Warrior vs. the Economic Opportunity President

Throughout his short and meteoric political career, President Trump has flaunted political norms and defied expectations, by not only driving up the negatives of his opponents, but by driving up the intensity of his base supporters. The numbers in this survey indicate that a successful re-election for him will require more of the same. At initial glance, the numbers for President Trump indicate he is significant political peril. He has a majority unfavorable rating on his image and a majority disapproval rating on his overall job approval. On the soft re-election ballot, support for new person is at fifty-seven percent (57%). Were this any other political office holder, these are normally warning signs of a likely defeat.

However, President Trump won in 2016 with a majority unfavorable rating by running against a candidate who also had a majority unfavorable rating. This was the first time in a presidential campaign our polling, or any polling for that matter, had ever seen a trend like this. In most Presidential elections, a critical swing group, usually around twenty-five percent, are those voters who have a favorable image of both candidates and make a vote decision based on perceived relatability of the two likable candidates. In 2016, that swing group never broke three-percent (3%) of the electorate, and the swing group that developed was voters who had an unfavorable view of both candidates (20%) and made a vote decision based on a combination of who they disliked least and the perceived ability of the candidate to succeed on issues of importance.

President Trump is poised to replicate this scenario in 2020, almost by necessity. If he and his allies can similarly damage the image of his opponent, President Trump can make an affirmative case to voters that he has succeeded on issues that matter.

On driving the negative image of the eventual Democratic presidential nominee, both time and the crowded Democratic presidential field are on Donald Trump's side. Yes, when either political party has a sitting President, that President clearly begins to define the image of that political party, for better or worse. At the same time, the political party outside the White House does not begin to clearly define their party until they have a presidential nominee, also for better or worse. So yes, the Trump White House can expect a drumbeat of negatives about his image, but with seventeen presidential candidates in the race and growing, we can also expect over the next twelve months, those Democratic candidates will be highlighting the weaknesses of the other candidates. That will give the Trump Campaign an opportunity over the next year to develop a composite picture of the "Democratic Nominee" made up of

the negatives of all the candidates running for the Democratic nomination.

At the same time, and with discipline of message over the next year, there is also an opportunity for President Trump to drive home an issue-based campaign of economic accomplishment seen in the Battleground data. Voters give the President majority job approval ratings on the economy (58%) and jobs (57%). For many voters, personal economic security is an issue of primary importance. If the President can continue to make the case that his policies have encouraged economic growth and created employment opportunities, especially for the Middle Class, he will be able to win over voters who might be put off by his sometimes abrasive personal style.

Indeed, a majority of voters (59%) indicate they are very (24%) or somewhat (35%) worried about an economic downturn that would negatively affect their family. This economic anxiety is certain to be a key factor in the 2020 elections, but can also be helpful in bringing focus to the economic message of the President. Most voters are willing to accept a significant level of frustration with their political leaders if they believe that the policies of these leaders will provide them with economic security and the opportunity to move up the economic ladder.

The Battle over the Gender Gap – Not as simple as it Looks

Using the "Generic Ballot" as a measurement to look at the Gender Gap, this latest Battleground Poll shows one of the worst, if not the worst, gender gaps in the twenty-eight years of conducting the Battleground Poll. Men are voting Republican by 44% to 35%, or a nine-point margin, while women are voting Democratic by 48% to 30%, or an eighteen-point margin. In our past Republican analysis of the gender gap, we have always put forward the hypothesis that women cannot be looked at as a monolithic group and that the gender gap was more of a "married gap" and a "racial gap." Republicans, in fact, held a double-digit lead amongst married White women, and a single digit lead with White women overall. The sharp increase in the gender gap, however, has been largely driven from a decline in support for Republicans from those very same groups of women. With White women overall, instead of a single digit advantage for Republicans we now have a six-point disadvantage and with married White women, instead of a double digit advantage, in this latest Battleground Poll, Republicans only have a 4-point advantage (40% to 36%).

Certainly, a lot of the decline in the female votes has been attributed to their reaction to President Trump's persona – White women hold a net 13-point negative image (41% favorable – 54% unfavorable) and married White women are also upside down by 3-points (46% favorable – 49% unfavorable). It is also clear in the data, however, that this decline in support of women is not coming from Republican women. If fact, Republican women are slightly more likely (89% to 87%) to be favorable towards President Trump than their male counterparts.

As mentioned in the prior section, while many of the female voters may have taken a step away from Republicans because of Donald Trump's persona, President Trump's job approval on economic issues and a focus on those issues may be the key to moving these key voting blocks of women back in the Republican direction. By a twenty point margin (58% to 38%), White women approve of the job Donald Trump is doing on the economy, and by a twenty-nine point margin (63% to 34%) married White women approve of the job Donald Trump is doing on the economy. Even with White suburban women who were often the focus of news coverage in the 2018 campaign and Democrats taking control of Congress, this voter block splits 49% approve – 49% disapprove of Trump's handling on the economy.

Likewise, on handling the issue of Jobs, President Trump has a net 24-point advantage with White women (57% approve – 33% disapprove), and a net 34-point advantage with married White women (63% approve – 29% disapprove).

Clearly in the data a number of voters have moved from "reluctant" Trump voters or even Never Trump Voters to "he is never going to change Trump Voters." These are voters who have moved to putting a priority on President Trump's issue agenda rather than his persona. Clearly many of the women who have traditionally voted Republican in the past are not there yet, but the potential is certainly there on economic issues. The issue for the Trump campaign is one of message discipline and not issue selection. This will be very interesting to watch as the Democrats struggle with picking the candidate to carry their banner.

The Battle for Control of Congress – Issues Matter

The issue handling series on this survey provides a clear illustration on which issues both parties should want voters to focus. This was a split sample question series with Trump versus the Democrats given to one half of respondents and Republicans in Congress versus Democrats given to the other half. As seen below, Republicans should want the political conversation to focus on jobs, the economy, and national security while Democrats are best served having the political conversation focus on education and health care.

Issue	Trump	Dems in Congress	Net Trump-Dem		GOP in Congress	Dems in Congress	Net GOP-Dem
Jobs	50%	40%	+10%		46%	38%	+8%
Economy	52%	40%	+12%		49%	37%	+12%
Taxes	47%	44%	+3%		41%	43%	-2%
Education	32%	59%	-27%		30%	54%	-24%
Health care	35%	55%	-20%		30%	54%	-24%
Immigration	42%	51%	-9%		40%	48%	-8%
National security	48%	43%	+5%		48%	38%	+10%
Dealing with special interests	37%	43%	-6%		28%	42%	-14%

The data clearly shows that the economy and jobs are issues Republicans can run on up and down the ballot, and that Republican positions on immigration, education, and heath care play well with the base, but should not be a major focus in any of the campaigns. One of the most interesting data points to come out of this latest Battleground poll is that one unexpected area where Trump can help Republicans up and down the ballot is with dealing with special interests. Where Republicans in Congress verses Democrats in Congress only have a four-point lead on handling the issue with Independent voters, President Trump has a fourteen-point lead over the Democrats on dealing with special interests among Independents. This could have a huge effect in blunting Progressive Democrats on their populist economic messages we have already begun to see build this election cycle.

Conclusions – The More Things Change…

Much to the consternation of political professionals on both sides of the aisle, candidates are often eager to use the same themes and tactics from their last campaign. For once, this may be the correct instinct. We are again looking at an election with a highly engaged and deeply partisan and divided electorate. Campaigns will be won by persuading voters about which issues are of most importance and by capitalizing on advantages on these issues.

Many voters will have a significant level of economic anxiety and a significant level of frustration with Congress and its leaders. Republican candidates, in particular, will need to blunt the current gender gap on the generic ballot by running on issues where the GOP has the clear advantage – jobs, the economy, and national security. They will need these issues because they are not likely to have a broadly popular Presidential candidate to lift the electoral tide for them.

Overall, successful candidates at all levels will need to find ways to ease the economic concerns of voters as well as make the case that they will be part of the solution and not of the institution. This is a very challenging task, particularly for incumbents.

In fact, for the incumbent at the top of the ticket, President Trump, to look to replicate the dynamics of the 2016 campaign. While significant numbers of voters are troubled his persona and rhetoric, a majority of voters approve his work on the economy and jobs and see him as superior to the Democrats in handling these issues. If he can again turn this election to a referendum on personal economic opportunity, while the Democrats remain focused on Donald Trump's persona and style, he can win re-election.